



Dementia Friendly Walking Project

EVALUATION REPORT. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Members of the Faculty of Social Science at the University of Stirling were commissioned by Paths for All to evaluate the progress of the second year of the Dementia Friendly Walking project. Paths for All wished to evaluate the current progress of the programme and the experiences and perspectives of people living with dementia who are attending dementia friendly walking groups across Scotland. The Evaluation project took place between April and June 2017.

Goals of the Paths for All's Dementia Friendly Walking project are to make walking more accessible to people living with dementia, raise awareness of walking among people with dementia, and develop dementia friendly walking projects across their walking groups.

METHODOLOGY

The evaluation methodology adopted a co-production methodology which involved three older people acting as 'community researchers'. Community researchers were trained in carrying out research, including the collection of qualitative research data and data analysis. After receiving initial training from university members of staff, community researchers accompanied academic researchers in fieldwork. A second workshop then followed in which research data was analysed in conjunction with community researchers. The research methodology adopted in this study used three research methods; visual methods, walking interviews with people affected by dementia (people with dementia and their carers) and a focus group with walking group volunteers and walking group leaders.

Five walking group projects, located in Bonnybridge, Penicuik, East Dunbartonshire, Stirling, Stanley and Muirton took part in the project. Data was subjected to thematic analysis between community and academic researchers.

FINDINGS

Findings were organised according to five major themes.

1. Being with other people
2. Being outdoors
3. Ethos and atmosphere
4. Feeling secure
5. Leadership and organisation

Walking groups gave people with dementia opportunities to socialise with other people, in a safe and comfortable environment. Dementia friendly walks were felt to be inclusive to all attendees, and gave people with dementia reassurance and support which enabled them to get out walking. Dementia friendly aspects of walks were important in terms of encouraging people to join walks, but were largely being subsumed within the wider inclusiveness people

felt when people attended walks. Walks also gave carers and people with dementia opportunities to engage in a social activity together but separately, supporting relationships by enabling people to share experiences while giving them some brief space from each other.

Walking groups also gave people the opportunity to access the outdoors and a safe and secure environment. Exercising outdoors in the form of walking was preferable to other forms of exercise, and was important for maintaining good health and wellbeing. Walking groups also gave people opportunities to explore their local environments, including local fauna and flora, and heritage and architecture. Negotiating local traffic and roads could be difficult for some, so it was important that walks avoided crossing roads or walking in busy areas where possible.

Central to the walking groups was the ethos and atmosphere found when attending groups. Attending walking groups gave attendees the opportunity to reinforce their independence and fitness, while also serving as a social group that people could belong to. Camaraderie and humour were important features in walks that encouraged people to keep attending. Groups also enabled people with dementia to demonstrate what they could still do, rather than the problems they faced due to their condition.

Walking groups also were events where people with dementia felt safe, secure and supported. Walks were also important in improving people's confidence, as they were able to participate, but also knew that help would be available if it was required. Features such as road traffic, uneven path surfaces or lack of seating could however limit people's ability to take part in walks.

The role of walk leaders was essential to the easy running of group walks. Most attendees felt that without the walk leaders to organise walks, then walking groups would not take place. In addition group leaders and other volunteers fulfilled roles which went beyond their role description, such as collecting walking group attendees from their homes, but which was essential in enabling people with dementia to take part. Walk leaders also fulfilled roles in terms of organising and facilitating walks, recruiting new members, and creating partnerships with local agencies.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Walking groups played an important part in enabling people living with and affected with dementia to access the outdoors, engage in physical exercise, and most importantly, to engage with other people within a largely safe and secure outdoor environment. Formal support in the form of walk leaders and co-ordinators, alongside volunteers within groups were crucial to walks fulfilling the above role. Central to benefits of walking groups were their overall inclusive atmosphere. Walking groups were accessible for people with dementia, but in most cases were not exclusive to people with dementia. Walk leaders were identified as needing formal support in fulfilling their roles, and were seen as vital to the continued running of walking groups. Concerns about continued funding for walk leaders among people attending walks were common, with attendees feeling that walks would collapse if they

reverted to a model based solely on volunteers.

Specific recommendations include;

- Ensuring walk leaders receive adequate training and support in order to fulfil their role.
- Recognising the wider activities that walk leaders perform when organising and sustaining walking groups, which may go beyond formal requirements placed upon walk leaders.
- Ensure access to a range of localities and multi-sensory walking experiences, while also ensuring that people will not face too many hazards which may restrict their ability to attend walks.
- An inclusive model based on mixed groups including people with and without dementia is recommended as the main model for walks. While walks should be promoted as dementia friendly, a model based exclusively on walks for people with dementia may be less successful in facilitating the overarching sense of inclusiveness that those participating valued.