

Natural England Commissioned Report NECR070

An evaluation of walking schemes in Devon

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Foreword

Natural England commission a range of reports from external contractors to provide evidence and advice to assist us in delivering our duties. The views in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of Natural England.

Background

When Walking for Health was launched in 2000 walking was not considered a serious form of exercise. Now the health benefits of short, regular, brisk walks are widely understood. The Department of Health considers that health walks can be a way of increasing people's levels of physical activity and improving their health.

In 2007, Department of Health and Natural England working in partnership with local statutory and voluntary organisations took the decision to invest in an expansion of Walking for Health as part of the package of public health initiatives aimed at getting people more active.

As part of the Walking for Health expansion a programme of evaluation was established. The aims of the programme were to evaluate, quantitatively and qualitatively, both health and environmental outcomes from the Walking for Health intervention. To deliver the breadth and depth of evaluation Natural England has worked with research and academic partners.

This report was carried out independently by Devon County Council in 2007, and presents research from a joint evaluation carried out across seven walk schemes in Devon, via participant questionnaires.

Although completed prior to the expansion of Walking for Health, the report nevertheless provides useful insight that can be considered alongside more recent research. The results – covering such topics as the demographic profile of walkers, attendance, benefits and changes to physical activity levels – will be of interest to anyone involved in delivering led walk schemes.

This report should be cited as:

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Further information

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Summary

This report from Devon County Council presents the findings of an evaluation of seven walking schemes, compiled from a survey questionnaire completed by over 700 walk participants. It covers topics including the demographic profile of participants, frequency of attendance, benefits obtained, and changes in physical activity levels. The report will be of interest to anyone involved in the delivery of similar led walk schemes.

The findings show that participants were primarily female and aged over 50, and from the middle two deprivation quartiles. [Note that ethnicity data, although included on the survey questionnaire, was not mentioned by the original author in the original 2007 report.] There was a spread frequency of attendance, with reasons for low attendance largely either logistical, or related to a desire for longer, faster walks, or other forms of physical activity. The most commonly cited benefits of attending the walks were making friends, feeling better about oneself, and improving levels of fitness; with those who attended more frequently and for longer generally feeling more benefit(s).

3 in 10 participants (32%) reported that they did more physical activity at the time of survey compared to when they joined the walk schemes, with 3% doing less; whilst more than half (52%) indicated that they now walked short journeys that they used to do by car.

Acknowledgements

Natural England and Devon County Council would like to thank the walking schemes mentioned in this report, and the many walkers who responded. Your help and enthusiasm in contributing to this survey and its findings are greatly appreciated.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background

This report presents the findings from a joint evaluation of seven walking schemes undertaken in March 2007. The schemes were based in Exeter, Mid Devon, North Devon, South Hams, Teignbridge, Westbank and Plymouth Guild. The evaluation aimed to give individual schemes feedback from their walkers and provide a Devon-wide profile of the walking schemes.

1.2 Methodology

A survey questionnaire, designed in collaboration with Devon County Council (DCC) consultation department and with public health advice, was sent out to all individuals on the databases of the seven walking schemes. The survey had a 30% response rate, with 2,395 questionnaires sent out and 728 returned.

2. Results

2.1 Demographic profile

Respondents' age and sex can be seen in Figure 1. 77% of walkers are female, and 87% are aged 50 or over. Table 1 shows respondents' socio-economic status.

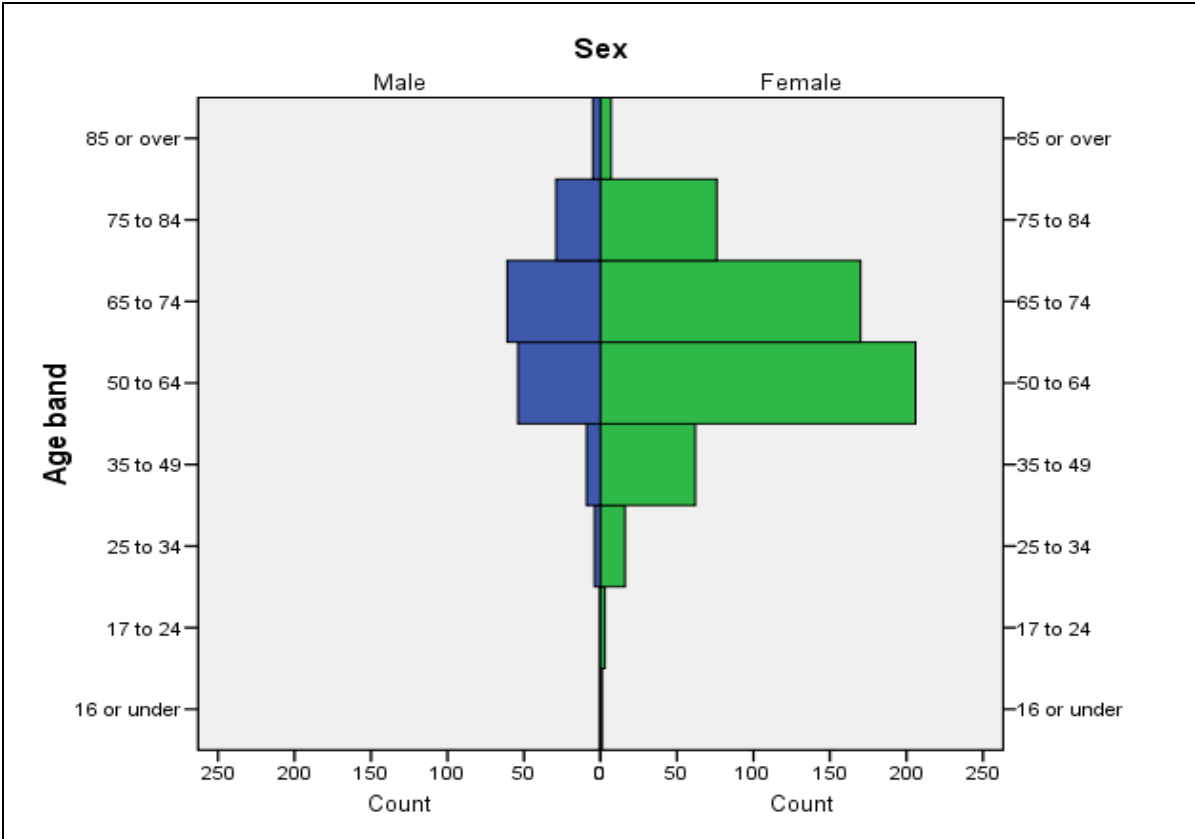


Figure 1 Devon Walking Scheme Participants: age and sex

Table 1 Socio-economic status of Survey Respondents compared with all walking scheme walkers and all people in Devon

IMD 2004 area deprivation scores:	% Total Devon population	% All Devon walkers	% Survey Respondents
25% most deprived in UK	7.6	6.5	3.9
25% above average for UK	37.6	41.9	42.2
25% below average for UK	41.1	42.7	44.3
25% least deprived in UK	13.8	8.9	9.6

2.2 Frequency of attendance

Figure 2 shows how often participants attended walks: 54% attend frequently (once or more a week or fortnightly) and 45% attend infrequently (monthly or less often).

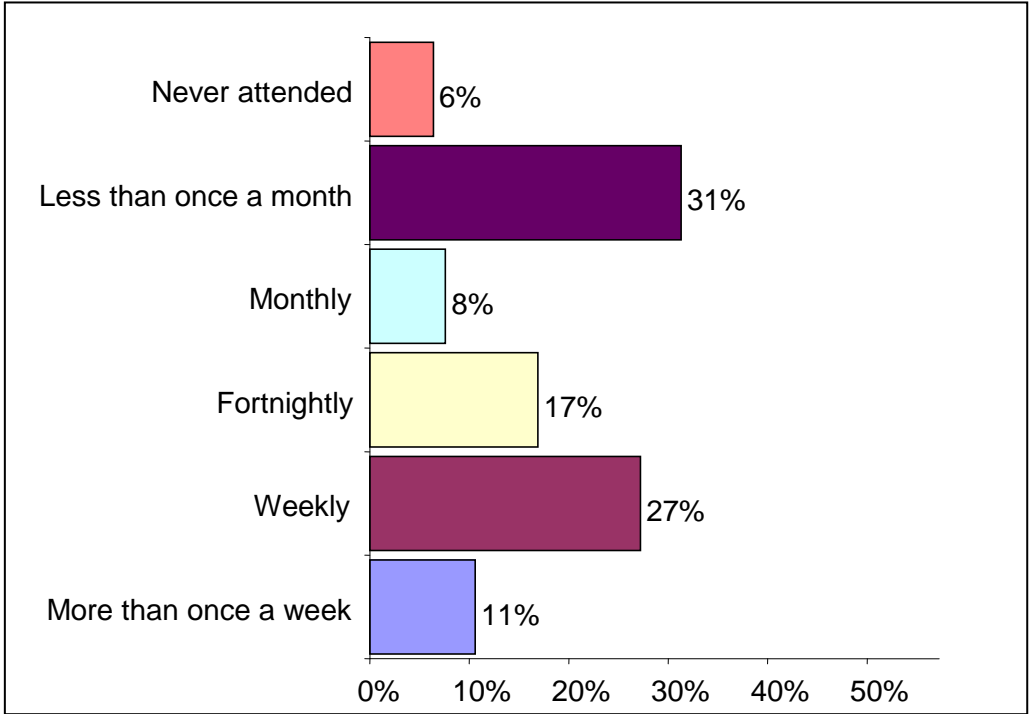


Figure 2 How frequently respondents said they attended one of the led walks

2.3 Why do some people attend the walks infrequently or not at all?

People who stated they attended led walks infrequently (monthly or less often) were asked to state why. Most often people said it was because the walks did not fit into their daily routines (31%). 16% said it was because they are now doing exercise other than walking and 14% indicated that they had joined another walking group or were walking on their own. 10% said it was because walks were too short whilst only 2% said it was because they were too long; twice as many said it was because walks were too slow, rather than too fast (6% versus 3%); 8% said they had become bored of the routes.

These responses suggest that, other than for logistical reasons, most people don't come along, or no longer come on the led walks, as they are now looking for longer, faster more varied routes or other forms of physical activity. See figure 3 for a breakdown of all responses.

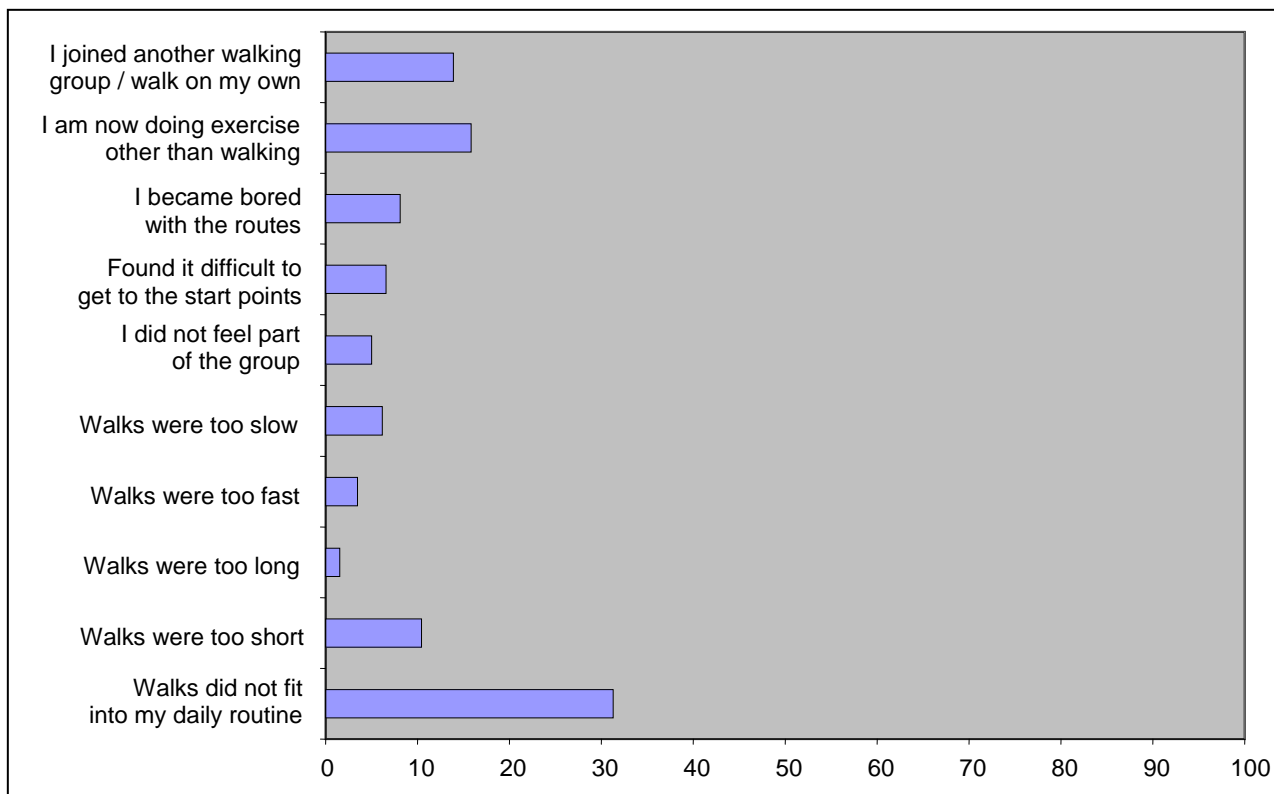


Figure 3 People who have never attended walks or have only attended occasionally give their reasons why

2.4 How do people benefit from the led walks?

Respondents who have participated in the walks were asked to indicate how they have benefited. Most frequently respondents cited 'help in making friends'. Figures 4-17 show the range of benefits. Generally the longer and more frequently people walk with a scheme the more they feel they benefit.

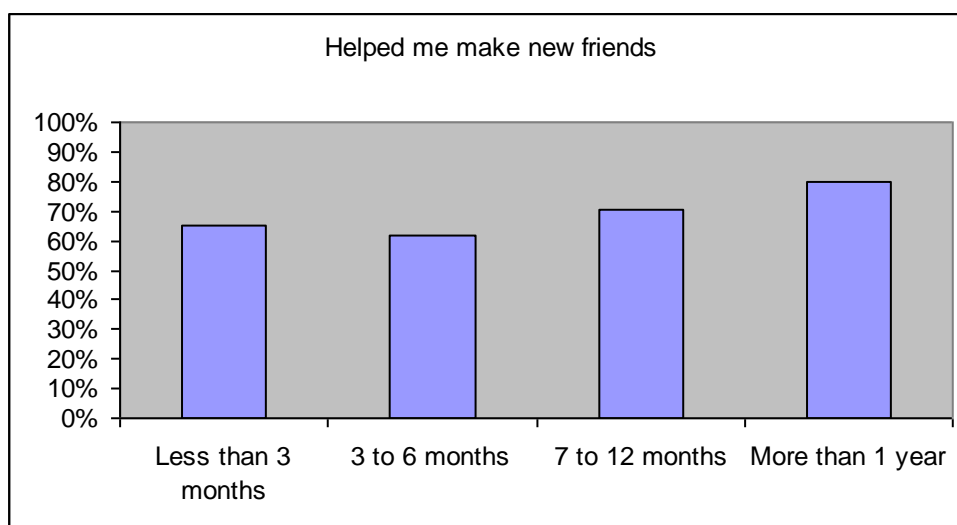


Figure 4 % of walkers stating that the led walks: 'helped me make new friends', by length of time attending the scheme

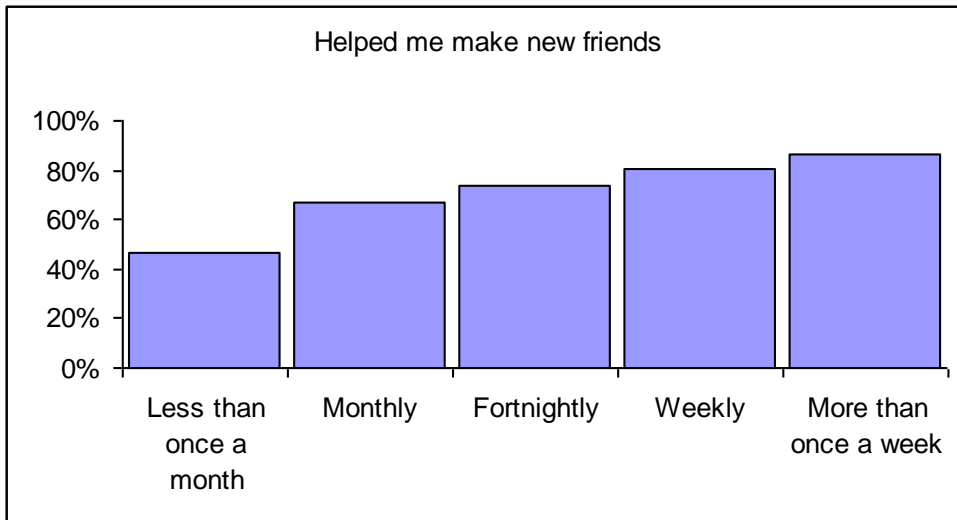


Figure 5 % of walkers stating that the led walks: ‘helped me make new friends’, by frequency of attending led walks

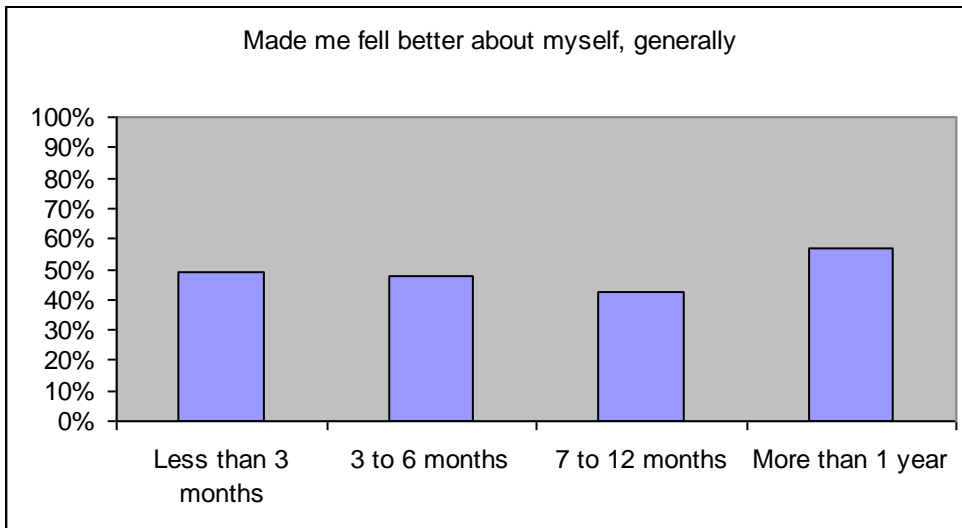


Figure 6 % of walkers stating that the led walks: ‘made me feel better about myself, generally’, by length of time attending the scheme

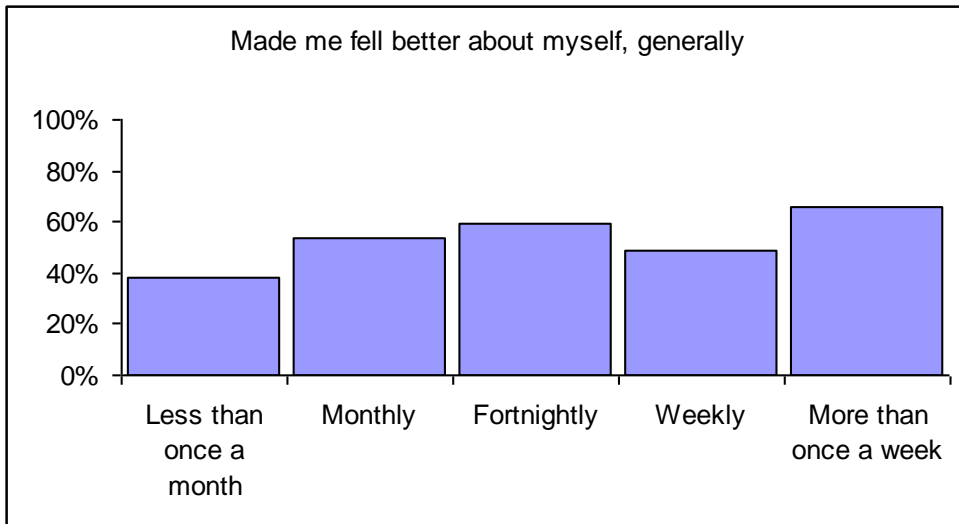


Figure 7 % of walkers stating that the led walks: ‘made me feel better about myself, generally’, by frequency of attending led walks

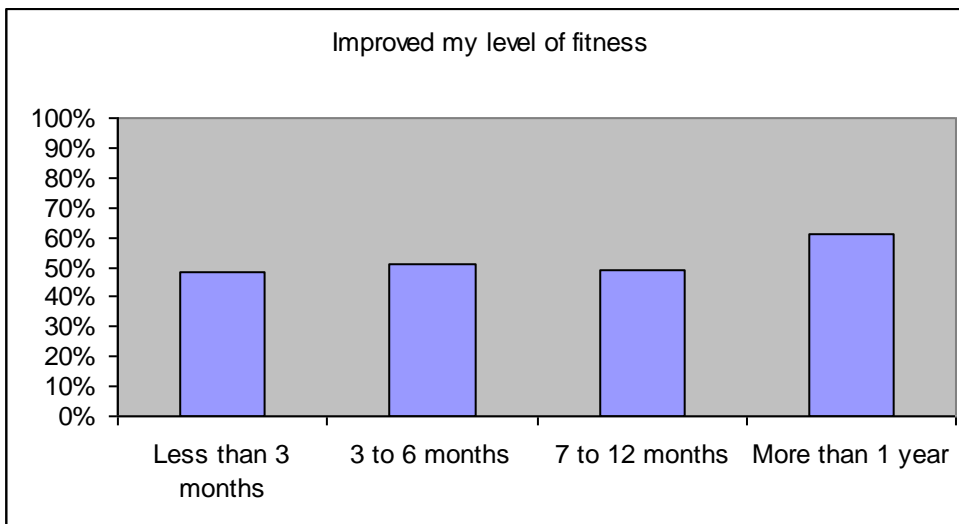


Figure 8 % of walkers stating that the led walks: ‘improved my level of fitness’, by length of time attending the scheme

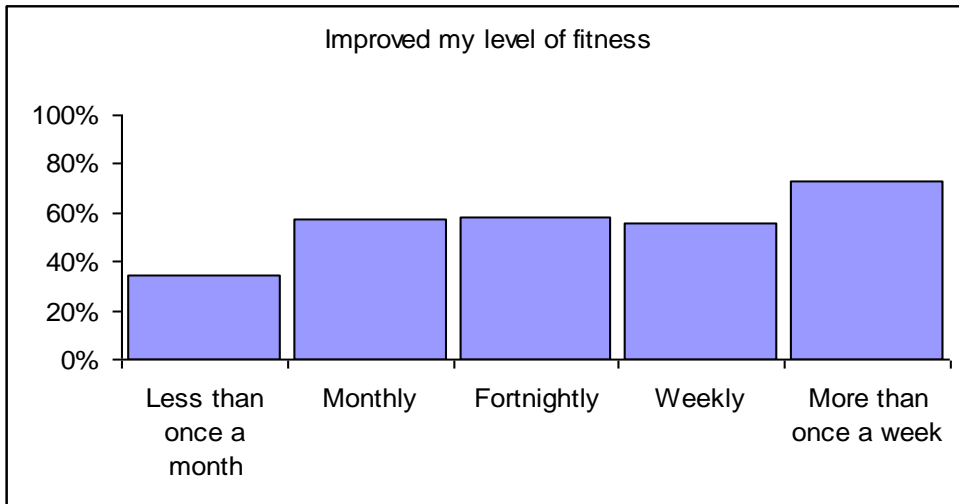


Figure 9 % of walkers stating that the led walks: 'improved my level of fitness', by frequency of attending led walks

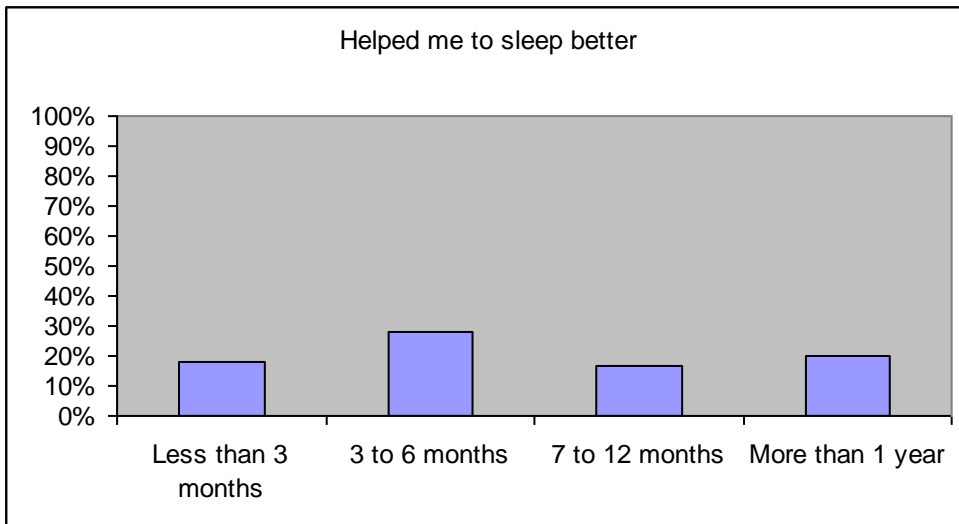


Figure 10 % of walkers stating that the led walks: 'helped me to sleep better', by length of time attending the scheme

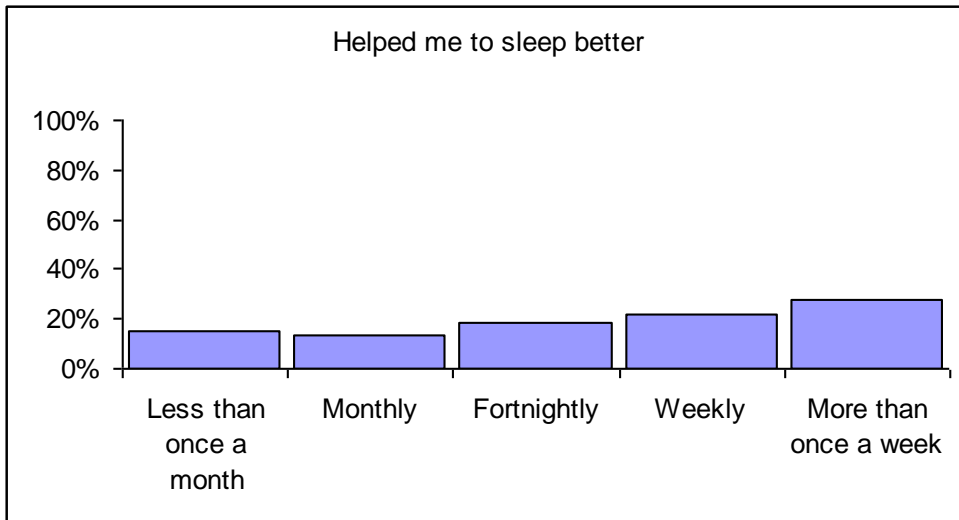


Figure 11 % of walkers stating that the led walks: ‘helped me to sleep better’, by frequency of attending led walks

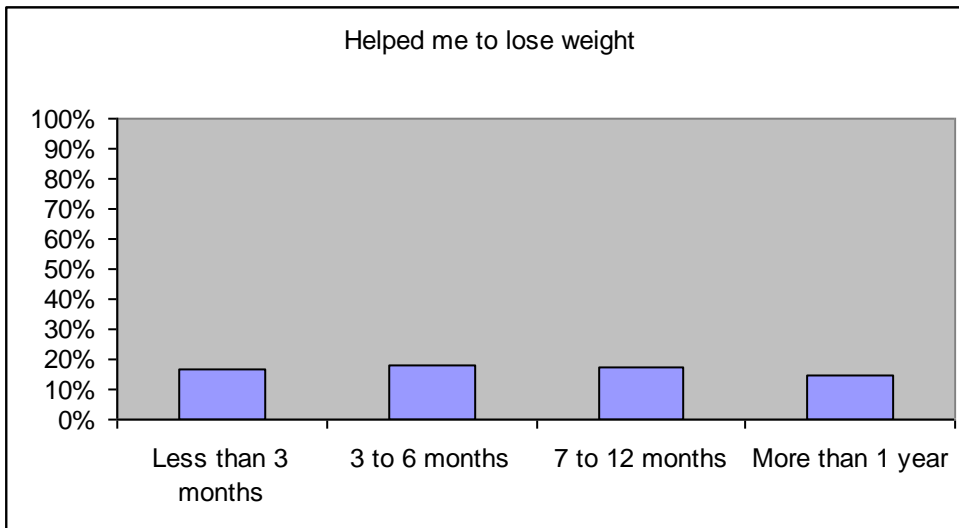


Figure 12 % of walkers stating that the led walks: ‘helped me to lose weight’, by length of time attending the scheme

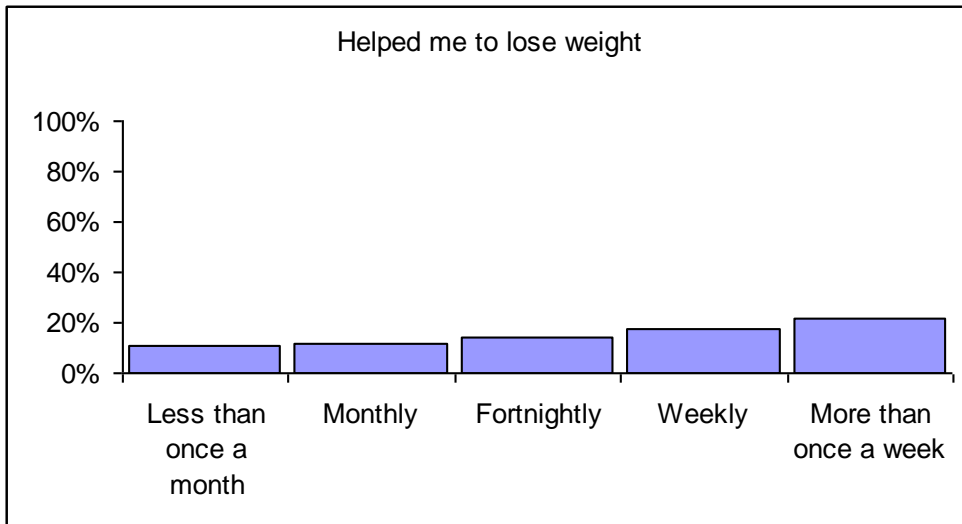


Figure 13 % of walkers stating that the led walks: 'helped me to lose weight', by frequency of attending led walks

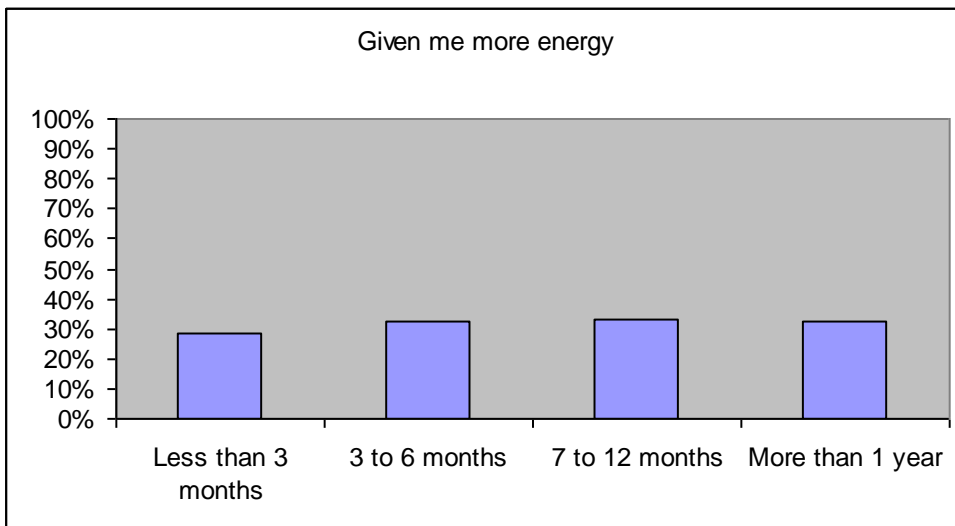


Figure 14 % of walkers stating that the led walks have: 'given me more energy', by length of time attending the scheme

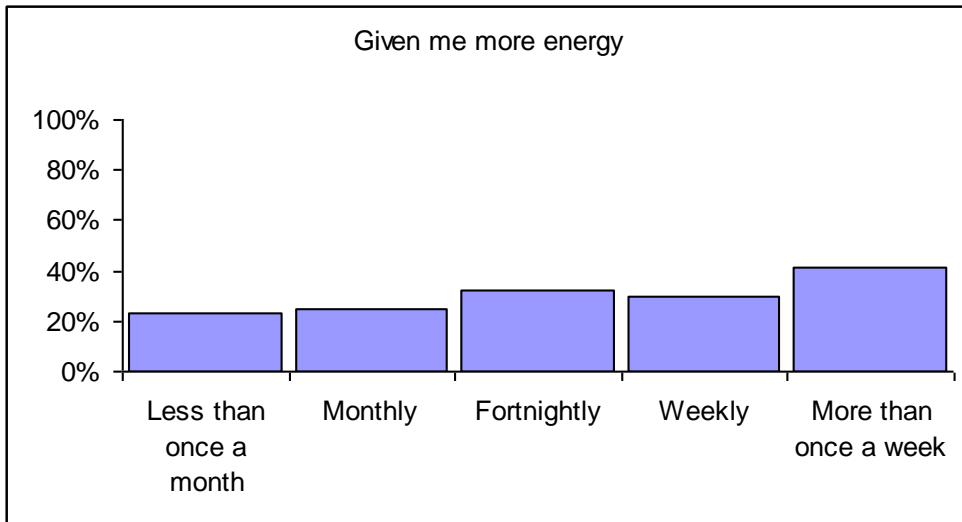


Figure 15 % of walkers stating that the led walks have: 'given me more energy', by frequency of attending led walks

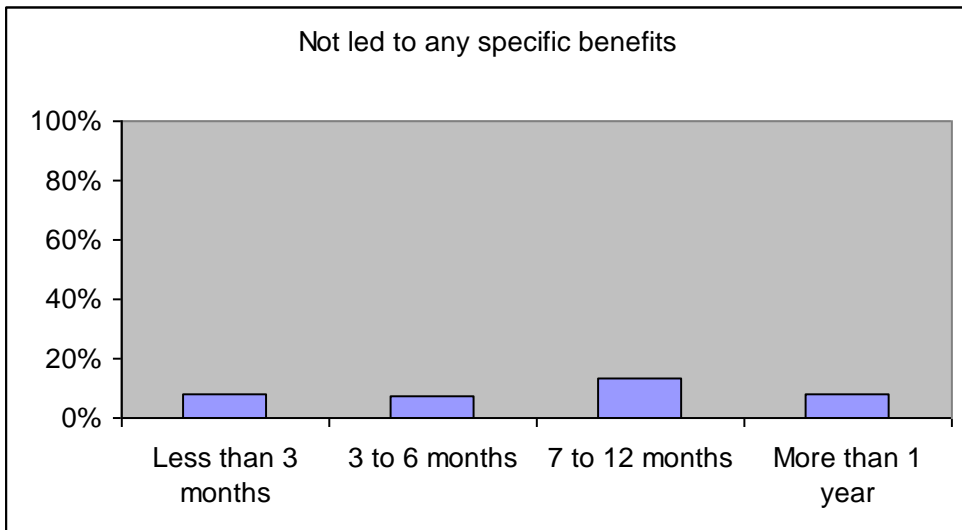


Figure 16 % of walkers stating that the led walks have: 'not led to any specific benefits', by length of time attending the scheme

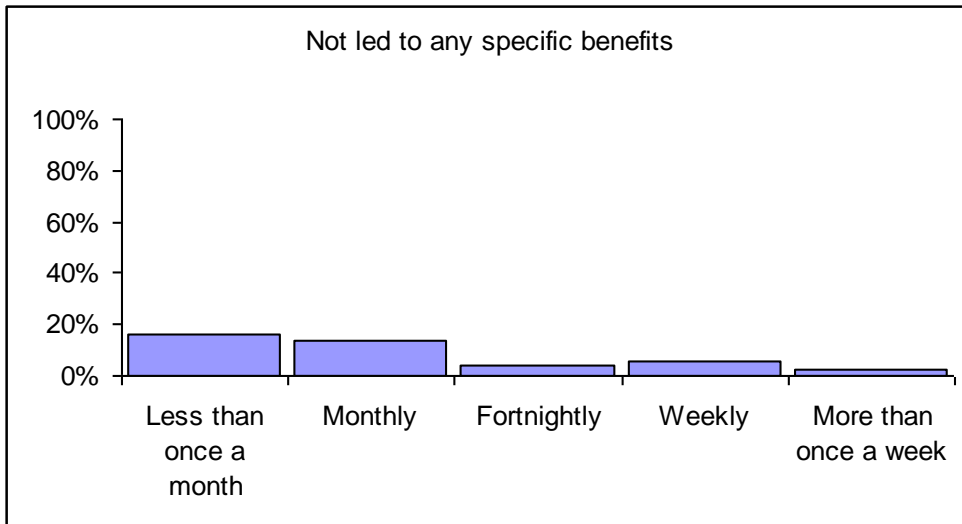


Figure 17 % of walkers stating that the led walks have: 'not led to any specific benefits', by frequency of attending led walks

2.5 Levels of physical activity among participants

Respondents were asked to report on how many days of the week they do at least 30 minutes of moderate physical activity, defined as 'sufficient effort to make you breath harder, get a little warmer and raise your pulse'. 76% of respondents said they do at least 30 minutes of moderate physical activity on at least 3 days a week, and 39% of respondents said they do at least 30 minutes of physical activity on at least 5 days a week, see figure 4.

The Sport England survey 'Active People' provides the best available comparator data. It shows that nationally only 21% of people do at least 30 *consecutive* minutes of physical activity on at least 3 days of the week. In Devon this ranges from 26.2% of people in West Devon to 19.5% of people in Torridge. As the national survey specified 'consecutive' minutes and was a telephone survey it can't be compared directly with the Devon walking scheme survey. However, it does at least suggest that the people on the walking schemes in Devon are taking above average levels of physical activity.

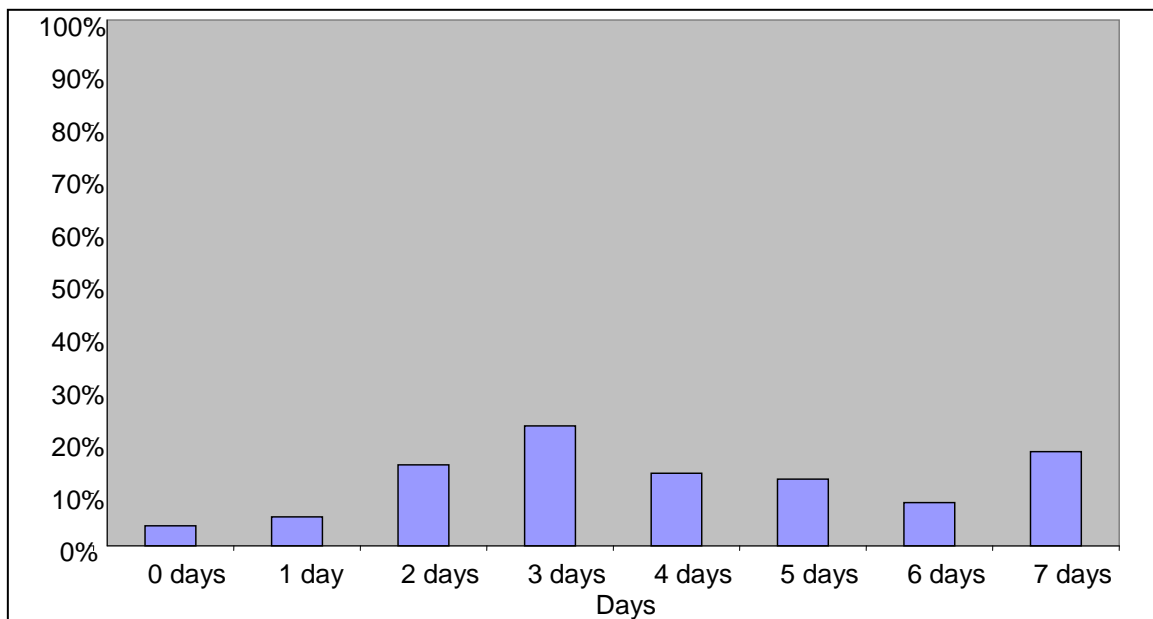


Figure 18 How many days a week do you do at least 30 minutes of moderate physical activity

2.6 How active do people feel they are now in comparison to before they joined?

32% of people reported that they do more physical activity now when compared with the amount they did before they joined the led walks. Only 3% do less than when they joined whilst 65% of respondents reported that they do about the same level now as before they started the scheme. See figure 19. These results may be affected by people's ability to recall their level of activity before they joined the scheme and by seasonal factors.

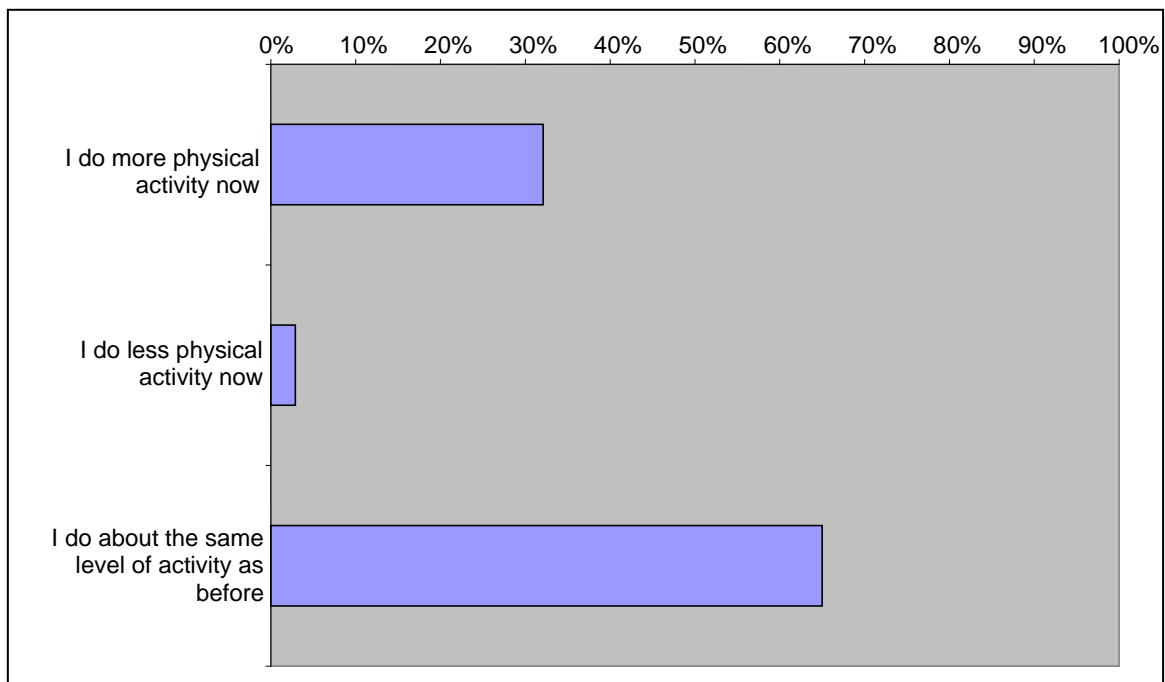


Figure 19 How do participants' levels of physical activity now compare with their level of physical activity before they started the scheme

Further analysis showed, as expected, that the more often walkers attend a walk and the longer they have been attending led walks, the more likely they are to do more physical activity now when compared with their levels of physical activity before they started the scheme.

Table 2 Changes in participants' physical activity levels, by length of time attending

How does your level of physical activity now compare with your level of physical activity before you joined the scheme?	How often do you usually attend one of the led walks					TOTAL
	< once a month	monthly	fort-nightly	weekly	> weekly	
I do more now	25%	21%	35%	35%	46%	32%
I do less now	3%	6%	2%	5%	0%	3%
I do about the same as before	73%	73%	63%	61%	54%	65%

Table 3 Changes in participants' physical activity levels, by frequency of attending

	How long have you been participating in the walks?				
How does your level of physical activity now compare with your level of physical activity before you joined the scheme?	< 3 months	3-6 months	7-12 months	>1 year	TOTAL
I do more now	27%	38%	24%	37%	32%
I do less now	2%	2%	4%	3%	3%
I do about the same as before	72%	60%	72%	60%	65%

2.7 Do respondents have a medical condition that they feel has been improved by coming on the walks?

28% of respondents reported that they had a medical condition that they felt had been improved as a result of the walks. This question was asked as some schemes were initially set up as GP referral schemes. These schemes would take 'referrals' from GPs for people with a range of medical conditions that may be helped by increased physical activity. Most walking schemes today are not limited to referrals from GPs and are open to all and are widely advertised.

2.8 Since joining the schemes, do respondents walk on short journeys that they used to do by car?

In addition to the social and physical benefits of walking, the schemes aimed to encourage sustainable forms of transport. The evaluation showed that 42% of walking scheme participants walk to the start of the route and 28% drive in a car with others. Only 23% drive alone to the start of a walk. 52% of respondents indicated that since joining the scheme they are now walking on short journeys that they used to do by car. See Figure 20 for more detail.

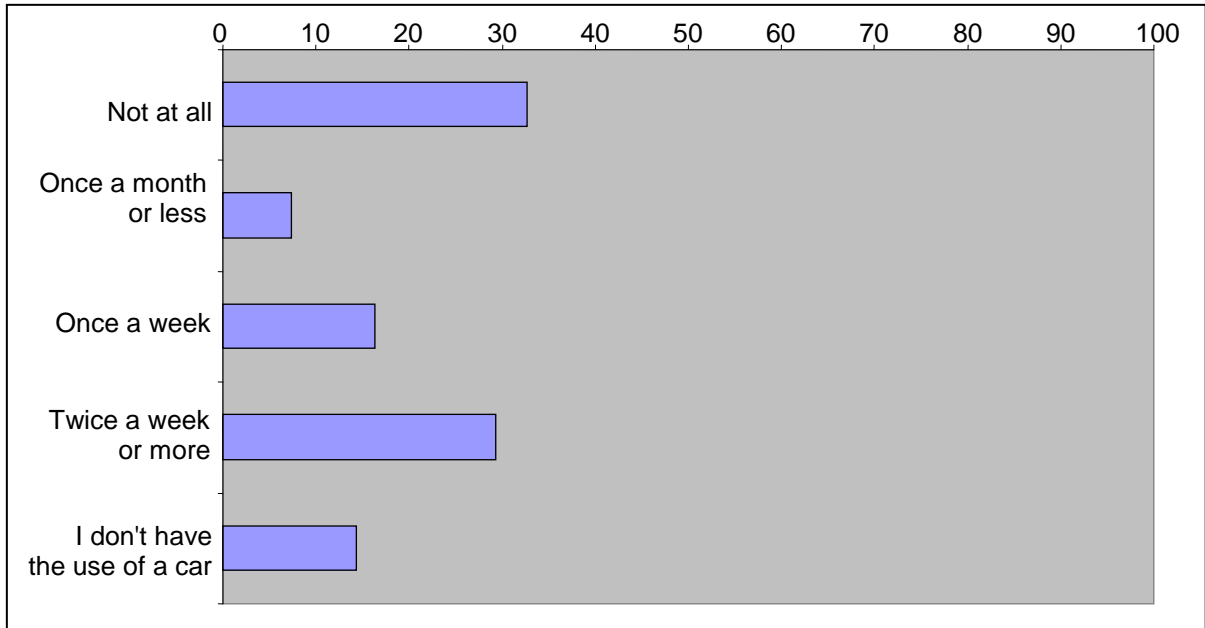


Figure 20 Since joining the scheme how often are you walking on short journeys that you used to do by car

Conclusion

The results of this evaluation show that those who walk with walking schemes across Devon benefit in a number of ways. Many respondents report that they have been able to make friends, generally feel better about themselves and have improved their level of fitness as a result of the walks. Where walkers report that they no longer walk with the scheme this is, after logistical reasons, most often reported to be because they are looking for faster and longer walks and other forms of physical activity. One of the original ideas behind the schemes was to fill a gap by providing shorter and slower paced led walks in the hope that walkers would move onto the more challenging (faster and longer) led walks, or other forms of physical activity, in time.

The government white paper 'Choosing Health' and the national physical activity action plan 'Choosing Activity' highlighted the need to increase levels of physical activity across the whole population and particularly among the least active and most vulnerable.

The schemes may wish to consider how they can target their walks towards those who most need to increase their levels of activity. These groups include people living in those areas of Devon which are in the 25% most deprived areas of the UK and those people currently doing less than the recommended 30 minutes of moderate intensity physical activity 5 times a week. The most health benefit can be gained by those people currently doing very little or no physical activity and more effort could be made at targeting this group.

These walking schemes were initially designed as a way of helping people increase their physical activity. However, the striking finding of the evaluation is that the aspect of the walking schemes that participants' value most highly is the chance it gives them to meet new people and make new friends. The social aspect of the schemes should not be underestimated.

Appendix – Survey Questionnaire

Q14 Please tell us one thing you like about the walking scheme:
write in box below

And, if anything, one thing you would change: write in box below

Q15 How do you usually get to the start of the walks?
please cross (X) one box only

- Walk Travel in a car with others
 Bus Cycle
 Drive alone Other

Q16 If you have use of a car, since joining the scheme how often are you walking on short journeys that you used to do by car? cross (X) one box only

- Not at all Twice a week or more
 Once a month or less I don't have the use of a car
 Once a week

Q17 What is your ethnicity? This question helps us to assess whether people of all backgrounds are able to access the walks. please cross (X) one box only

- Asian White - British
 Black White - Other
 Chinese Other (please specify)
 Mixed

Thank you for taking the time to complete this questionnaire. The information will be held in strictest confidence and will be collated to help us assess the success of the scheme.

Please return your completed questionnaire in the post paid envelope provided by 31st March.

If you, or someone you know, needs this questionnaire in another format, or needs assistance to fill the form in please contact....

Health Walk Scheme Questionnaire

Thank you for taking the time to complete this questionnaire.
Please feel free to comment frankly where asked.

Mark answers with a cross X where requested.

Please tell us a bit about yourself:

Q1 Are you:
cross (X) one box only

- Male Female

Q2 Which of the following age bands are you in?
cross (X) one box only

- 16 or under 50 to 64
 17 to 24 65 to 74
 25 to 34 75 to 84
 35 to 49 85 or over

Q3 What is your home postcode?
please write in

--	--	--	--	--	--	--

Q4 How would you rate the following?
cross (X) one box per row

	Very Good	Good	Average	Poor	Very Poor	Not Applicable
Your initial contact with the scheme coordinator	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Information sent to you about the walks	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The programme of walks	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Volunteer walk leaders	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Q5 How often do you usually attend one of the led walks?
cross (X) one box only

- More than once a week
 Weekly
 Fortnightly
 Monthly
 Less than once a month
 Never attended
- } Please go to Q7
 } Please continue

Q8 If you have not been on our walks, or have only been alone occasionally, why was this? please cross (X) all boxes that apply

- Walks did not fit into my daily routine
- Walks were too short
- Walks were too long
- Walks were too fast
- Walks were too slow
- I did not feel part of the group
- Found it difficult to get to the start points
- I became bored with the routes
- I am now doing exercise other than walking
- I joined another walking group/walk on my own
- Other (please specify)

If you have never walked with us please go to question 17

Q7 When you have walked with us, how have you benefited? please cross (X) all boxes that apply

- Led to an improvement in my health
- Helped me make new friends
- Helped me to sleep better
- Helped me to lose weight
- Given me more energy
- Improved my level of fitness
- Improved my mobility
- Made me feel better about myself, generally
- Given me more self confidence
- Not led to any specific benefits

Q8 If you have experienced any other benefits, or problems, associated with the walks, please describe these in the box below:

Q9 Do you have a medical condition that you or your doctor thinks has been helped by coming on our walks? please cross (X) one box only

- Yes No Please specify condition

Q10 How many days a week do you do at least 30 minutes of moderate physical activity? (sufficient effort to make you breath harder, get a little warmer and raise your pulse) please cross (X) one box only

- 0 days 1 day 2 days 3 days 4 days 5 days 6 days 7 days

Q11 How does your level of physical activity now, compare with your level of activity before you started walking with us? please cross (X) one box only

- I do more physical activity now
 I do less physical activity now
 I do about the same level of activity as before

Q12 How long have you been participating in the walks? please cross (X) one box only

- Less than 3 months
 3 to 6 months
 7 to 12 months
 More than 1 year

Q13 Have you walked with us on more than one walk route? please cross (X) one box only

- Yes No

If Yes:

Which walk did you like the most and why? write in box below

Which walk did you like the least and why? write in box below