

# Walking Football Programme: Qualitative Evaluation

## *Final report: November 2023*



**Submitted by:**

**Dr Steve Bullough / Dr Kerry Griffiths / Gemma Hart / Simon Goldsmith**

Sport and Physical Activity Research Group, A118 Collegiate Hall

Sheffield Hallam University

@: [s.j.bullough@shu.ac.uk](mailto:s.j.bullough@shu.ac.uk) / 0114 225 5927

**To**

**Rebecca Barnham / Rebecca Collins**

Age UK Walking Football Project Manager / Programme Manager

Wellbeing Team, Age UK

7th Floor, One America Square, 17 Crosswall, London, EC3N 2LB

**30<sup>th</sup> November 2023**

# CONTENTS PAGE

<b>1. INTRODUCTION</b> .....	3
<b>2. METHOD</b> .....	4
<b>3. PROJECT LOGIC MODEL</b> .....	5
<b>4. SUMMARY OF THE EXISTING LITERATURE</b> .....	6
4.1 Introduction and methodology.....	6
4.2 Barriers and enablers.....	6
4.3 Delivery of interventions.....	7
4.4 Outcomes of walking football.....	8
4.5 Summary of the review.....	10
4.6 References.....	10
<b>5. REVIEW OF MONITORING DATA</b> .....	11
<b>6. SUMMARY OF PARTICIPANT FEEDBACK - COHORTS 1 &amp; 2</b> .....	12
<b>7. HEADLINE FINDINGS: THREE RESEARCH QUESTIONS</b> .....	13
<b>7.1. Identifying and engaging older people with walking football?</b> .....	13
7.1.1 Set-up / development phase.....	13
7.1.2 Recruitment / promotion.....	15
7.1.3 Paid-for promotion via social media.....	17
7.1.4 Logistics (session type / structure / approach).....	18
7.1.5 Scheduling (venue / time / day) and staff.....	18
7.1.6 Things that were tried but did not generate much traction.....	20
7.1.7 Key learning.....	21
<b>7.2. Working with other organisations</b> .....	21
7.2.1 Activities: Things that worked well / main successes.....	22
7.2.2 Partnership working: A mini case study from North Yorkshire Coast and Moors.....	26
7.2.3 Things that did not work as well / main challenges.....	28
7.2.4 Key learning.....	30
<b>7.3. Motivations and barriers for participating and sustaining engagement</b> .....	31
7.3.1 Motivations.....	31
7.3.2 Benefits / outcomes.....	32
7.3.3 Other (unintended) outcomes/benefits.....	35
7.3.4 Main challenges / barriers.....	36
7.3.5 Key Learning.....	41
<b>7.4. Other headline findings</b> .....	41
7.4.1 Sustainability planning.....	41
7.4.2 Cultivating a ‘workforce of volunteers’.....	42
7.4.3 Transition pathways to further football engagement.....	43
7.4.4 A greater focus on facilitating the social aspect.....	43
7.4.5 The perception of the Age UK brand.....	43
7.4.6 Support from Age UK project team.....	44
7.4.7 Expenditure budget.....	45
7.4.8 Emerging links with contribution to social value.....	45
<b>8. SUMMARY</b> .....	45
8.1 Summary of the three research questions.....	48
8.2 Progress against the programme theory (Theory of Change model).....	53
<b>APPENDIX 1: LITERATURE REVIEW SEARCH TERMS</b> .....	56
<b>APPENDIX 2. FEEDBACK FROM LOCAL AGE UK STAFF: COHORTS 1 &amp; 2</b> .....	57

# 1. INTRODUCTION

This report is the final report for the qualitative evaluation of the Age UK Walking Football Programme, which is the third round of funded projects. The evaluation has been conducted by the Sport Industry Research Group (SIRG) at Sheffield Hallam University. This report focuses on the findings from the Programme, which for most local Age UKs, saw delivery begin in March 2023. Initially, there were eight local Age UKs being funded to deliver walking football, with the aim for the funding to cover delivery across 14 groups, with six of the eight areas delivering two groups, and two areas delivering one group each (see Figure 1). The applications for funding included the partnerships outlined in Figure 1, and they were a mix of delivery partners, facilities, County FAs, and local charities/organisations. One project (Age UK West Sussex) started delivery but did not generate sufficient numbers to continue, therefore this evaluation report is mainly based on the 13 groups that were running by October 2023.

*Figure 1: Funded Walking Football groups*

Local Age UK	Target Group	Start Date	Main Partners
Age UK Buckinghamshire Group 1	Women	February 2023	✓ Wycombe Wanderers Foundation network
Age UK Buckinghamshire Group 2	General Population (ethnic minority groups)	June 2023	
Age UK Gateshead	LSEG	March 2023	✓ Blaydon Youth & Community Centre
Age UK Kensington & Chelsea Group 1	Women	March 2023	✓ Chelsea Football Club Foundation
Age UK Kensington & Chelsea Group 2	General Population	June 2023	
Age UK Norwich Group 1	LSEG	February 2023	✓ University of East Anglia ✓ Goals Soccer Centre
Age UK Norwich Group 2	LSEG	April 2023	
Age UK North Yorkshire Coast & Moors Group 1	Female	March 2023	✓ Scarborough Athletic FC
Age UK North Yorkshire Coast & Moors Group 2	LTHC	July 2023	
Age UK Stockport Group 1	LTHC	February 2023	✓ Stockport Homes Group ✓ Life Leisure ✓ Keira's Kingdom
Age UK Stockport Group 2	Women / LTHC	February 2023	
Age UK Trafford Group 1	Women	March 2023	✓ The Menopause Café ✓ Nike (via Manchester County FA)
Age UK Trafford Group 2	General Population	February 2023	
Age UK West Sussex, Brighton & Hove	Women	March 2023	NA

LTHC – Long term health condition

LSEG – Lower socio-economic group

## 2. METHOD

The evaluation incorporated a mainly qualitative approach, including the following aspects:

- Creation of a programme logic model.
- A review of existing literature (up to April 2023).
- Online survey of lead staff from the two previous rounds of Age UK funded projects in this programme, referred to as Cohorts 1 & 2 (n=33).
- Assessment of existing feedback from participants from Cohorts 1 & 2 (n=318).
- Visits to existing walking football sessions in Sheffield to see them in action.
- Interviews with project leads from all local Age UK groups in May (n=8), and in October (n=8).
- Interviews with project partners in May (n=3), and in October (n=4).
- Focus groups in May/June (participants n=62), repeated in October (n=70).
- A review of project monitoring data supplied by project leads to Age UK (throughput, demographic summary, expenditure summary, success/challenge logs).

The focus groups were conducted with 9 of the 14 original groups in May/June, as some groups encountered a delayed start due to numbers or issues with facility availability. In October, feedback from 13 of the groups which were set up by the end of the programme was captured, excluding Age UK West Sussex, Brighton and Hove for the reasons outlined above, although the Project Lead was included in both rounds of interviews to capture their feedback on the Programme. Groups in Norwich, Kensington and Chelsea, and Buckinghamshire were conducted with people from both groups in the same session. Overall, across the two rounds of focus groups, **95** different participants were included in the research. These focus groups included a set list of questions around all three of the main research questions.

### *Research questions*

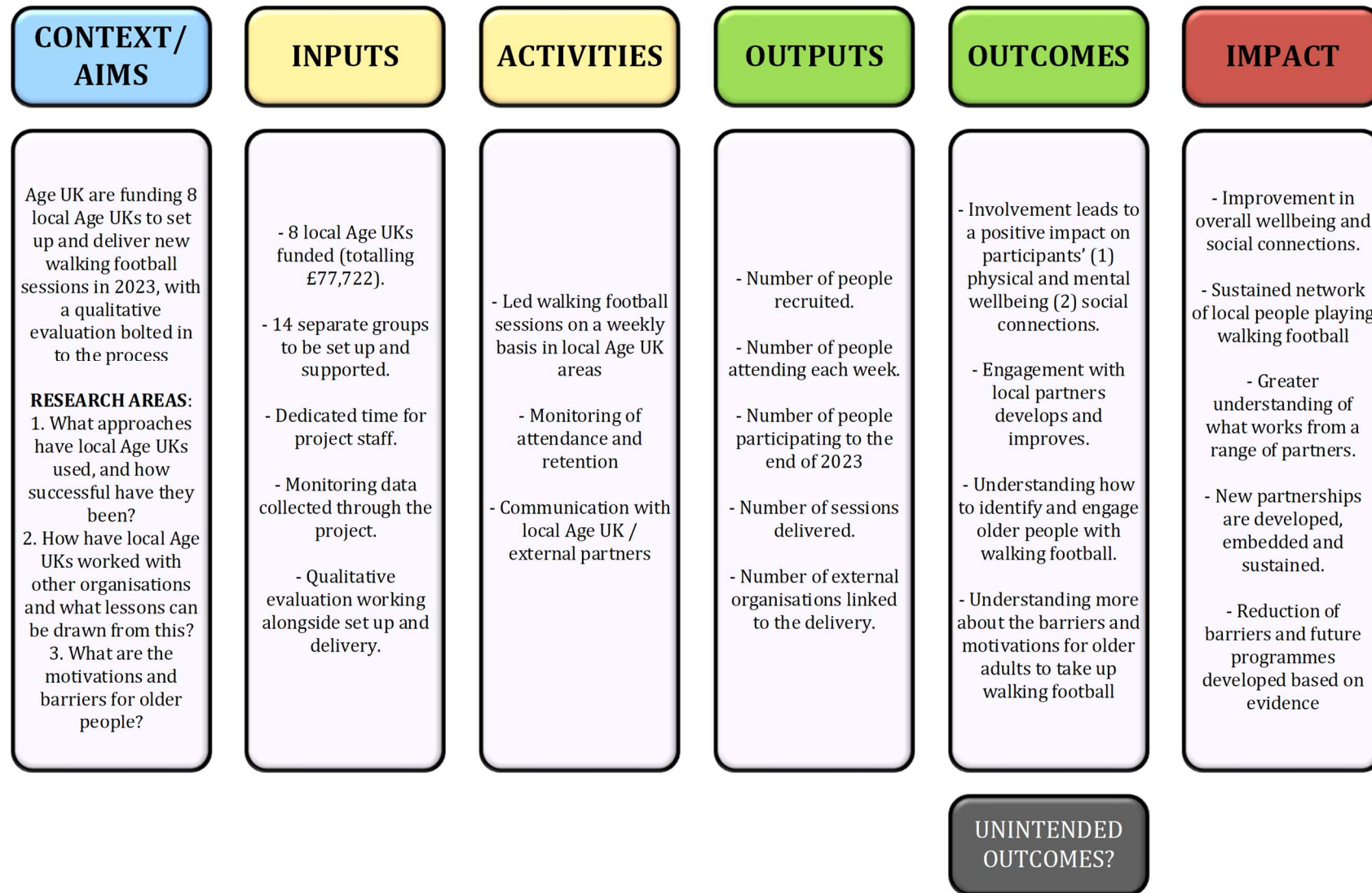
There are three headline research questions in the evaluation:

1. *What approaches have local Age UKs used to identify and engage older people with walking football, and how successful or not have they been?*
2. *How have local Age UKs worked with other organisations in their area to deliver walking football to older people, and what lessons can be drawn from this on how it impacts the successful delivery or otherwise of the sport?*
3. *What are the motivations and barriers for older people participating in walking football both in terms of sparking initial interest in playing, and then sustaining that engagement?*

### 3. PROJECT LOGIC MODEL

Below is the project logic model, which articulates the context, aims, and inputs which lead to the activities planned, and the anticipated outputs, outcomes, and impact.

Figure 2: Logic model



## 4. SUMMARY OF THE EXISTING LITERATURE

### 4.1 Introduction and methodology

This section summarises the key findings of a literature review for which the aim was to identify and consolidate existing evidence around walking football interventions for older adults. The full review including full list of references forms a standalone report which can be provided on request. In particular, the review had specific aims to uncover evidence / literature around the following:

- Barriers and enablers to participation in walking football.
- What works / what does not work in the delivery of walking football interventions.
- Examples of partnership working to develop or deliver interventions.
- The outcomes of participation in walking football for older adults.

The methodology used for this review involved a '*Quick Scoping Review*' (as described by Collins et al., 2015). The inclusion criteria for the review were as follows:

#### *Inclusion criteria*

- Age – Adults (older adults).
- Geographic location – UK focus (but include international research if relevant for comparison).
- Type of data – both quantitative and qualitative research.
- Type of evidence source – both academic (peer reviewed) sources and grey (non-academic / unpublished) literature and reports.

For each of the review aims, the following sections summarise the overarching findings, any gaps in the existing literature, and the implications for walking football interventions.

### 4.2 Barriers and enablers

The papers found in the review quite clearly show that there may be a range of different motivators and barriers to participation for older people. The papers can be split into two areas – those factors determining the initial decisions to try walking football in the first place, and factors which determine whether someone continues to participate longer-term.

#### *Trying walking football*

A complex range of personal, psychosocial, programme-related, and environmental factors determine initial decisions to try walking football, which include:

- Values and perceptions (including personal values around health and being active as well as preconceptions around what walking football may involve).
- Previous experiences of football and / or a love of the game – particularly for people that have previously been involved in the running format of the game.
- Outside influences from friends or family (for example encouragement to be active, practical support to attend sessions).
- Life events (retirement providing more free time, health conditions or injury preventing participation in running football).
- The ways in which walking football is presented and advertised.
- Confidence and self-efficacy in one's ability to participate.
- Practical and logistical factors such as location, accessibility of venue, cost, and the facilities available.



### *Continuing to participate*

Once someone has tried walking football, the decision to continue to participate longer-term is clearly also determined by several factors. These include:

- Enjoyment of the sessions, including competing and attaining a feeling of achievement.
- Realising the benefits of walking football – experiencing physical health, mental wellbeing and social benefits.
- Social level influences inside and outside of the team, including positive encouragement from peers outside of walking football and family members, as well as positive team cohesion, particularly the camaraderie of the teams and encouragement given between team members.
- Walking football culture - the acceptance of all ability levels within the club providing self-confidence and cultivating team connections.
- Session specific factors, including practical and logistical factors such as sessions or venues being accessible.
- Coach characteristics – participants appreciated when the coach showed concern for team players' wellbeing and having empathy, as well as positive coach rapport.

It is noted that different people will place different levels of importance on different factors for both initially trying walking football, and for continuing with participation, and the factors influencing participation may change over time. This points to a need to engage with and develop an understanding of the target audience's needs, experiences, and expectations, to design and deliver an appropriate programme that meets the needs of the audience at that moment in time.

### **4.3 Delivery of interventions**

The review found a number of papers which highlight critical factors to consider in delivering walking football sessions, in order to best engage participants and sustain their participation.

#### *Planning and design of sessions*

The literature shows that thorough planning and design of sessions is necessary. This should consider the multitude of barriers and facilitators to older adults' participation in walking football, which will impact on decisions made around the advertising messages used, the choice of venue, pricing of activities, and the structuring of sessions. Specific considerations featuring repeatedly in the literature include:

- Using a venue that is accessible and highly visible / central in the community – enhancing the prospect of attracting participants.
- Consulting with participants about the best days and times for sessions. Listening to feedback and involving participants in the design of sessions would help to empower participants plus draw on the strengths and assets of local people and communities.
- Whilst most participants are older, it is best not to put a prescriptive age range on the advertisements as there may be people outside of the age bracket who will be put off by this. It is suggested that sessions might be more attractive if they were pitched at ability levels rather than particular age groups.
- Gender was an inconsistent theme in the literature with participants having different preferences as to single-gender or mixed-gender sessions. Therefore, providing a mix of sessions to choose from may be useful.

- Using a multi-purpose facility that has football facilities but also toilets, changing, parking or easy access via public transport, and refreshments / seating areas to allow social time.
- Having a regular coach was beneficial to sessions as it allowed for a rapport to be built up, enabling greater progress of participants. Additionally, staff in the facility should be made more aware of walking football in order to welcome and direct participants.
- Monitoring and evaluation – both in providing feedback to participants on their progress in meeting their personal goals and targets, as well as to gather evidence to support funding bids and to provide evidence of programme success to partners.

### ***A person-centred approach***

Understanding the wide range of barriers and enablers to participation indicates that a ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach to delivery may be inadequate. The literature shows that an important initial part of the planning of sessions is about listening to and gathering an understanding of the target participants, to understand their motivations for participation, their wants and needs, and to develop sessions appropriate to them, as well as to make participants feel listened to and valued, building up a relationship of trust. Awareness of individuals’ mental and physical state prior to joining and introducing new people to the team in a sensitive way, is recommended for coaches and walking football programmes to take into consideration when inviting new participants to sessions.

### ***Building in social time to sessions***

The literature strongly suggests that having a social element to walking football sessions is important and indicates that consideration should be given to not only using facilities for the sessions which have some social space, but also building this into the timing and delivery of sessions, and organising other social events and activities, to help facilitate interactions and social connections between participants.

## **4.4 Outcomes of walking football**

The literature review found evidence of mixed volume on the extent to which walking football contributes to the different UK Government priority outcome areas for sport, namely physical health, mental wellbeing, individual development, and social and community development, as outlined in the Government’s Sports Strategy *Sporting Future - A New Strategy for an Active Nation* (HM Government, 2015).

### ***Physical health***

The largest volume of literature depicting the outcomes of walking football relates to physical health outcomes. It appears to be widely believed that walking football has health benefits for older adults, and indeed there are numerous articles and opinion pieces to be found online which describe that it has important health outcomes through fitness benefits gained through adherence to or maintenance of an active lifestyle for older people. In terms of empirical evidence of the health benefits, the literature demonstrates evidence of walking football’s potential role in both the prevention of ill health in older adults, and the treatment and rehabilitation for older adults with various health conditions. There is a mixture of findings, with papers generally demonstrating evidence of the health impacts of walking football, but with some papers calling for further research to make evident the longer-term outcomes, and other papers noting that



health outcomes depend upon the duration and frequency of participation. In particular the literature provides some evidence of the following health outcomes:

- Improved cardiovascular fitness.
- Improved bone health.
- Reduced blood pressure.
- Decreased resting heart rate.
- Weight loss, including reduced body fat and reduction in body mass index.

There is also some evidence of all of these health outcomes for different demographic groups including Asian populations, and for people with existing conditions including type 2 diabetes, although it should be noted that this is based on relatively small numbers of papers including small sample sizes, and further research would be recommended to fully substantiate these links.

### ***Mental wellbeing***

There were relatively fewer papers which described more subjective mental wellbeing benefits, but the papers that were found highlight some potential of walking football to create the following mental wellbeing outcomes for participants:

- Positive feelings – developed through sense of pride, accomplishment and confidence, improved self-esteem.
- Increased feelings of social wellbeing - feeling close to other people.
- Increased sense of purpose, structure, and focus – giving a focus to the week, getting out of the house.
- Exercising the memory and making quick decisions - dealing with problems well.

There was also some evidence that walking football has the potential to have these positive wellbeing outcomes for people with recognised mental health conditions as part of a mental healthcare delivery package.

### ***Individual development***

There is a lack of existing research around individual development outcomes for older adults and the evidence that does exist in this area is based on research with participants of a middle-aged demographic. This does not necessarily indicate that walking football does not have individual development outcomes for older adults, but rather represents a gap in the literature and calls for further research to evidence this link. Those papers that were found in this area relate to particular outcomes for middle-aged people with mental health conditions, including development of life skills such as improving health behaviours, and work-related skills such as:

- Improved time management.
- Improved planning and decision making.
- Improved communication skills.
- Improved leadership skills.

### ***Social and community development***

The review demonstrates the ways in which involvement with walking football can develop social connections, in particular, whilst on the pitch, social interactions as part of being a team, as well as, off the pitch, through social time before or after sessions. It should be noted however that, whilst the initial searches brought up an abundance of literature on the benefits of walking

football for developing social connections, these were sometimes based on news articles, opinion pieces or anecdotal evidence, and a relatively smaller number of papers were found that were based on larger scale empirical research to provide evidence of the impacts of walking football. This calls for further research to support these claims more substantively. The literature does however show some examples of the ways in which walking football has the following outcomes:

- Improved social networks.
- Increased feelings of community.
- Feeling close to other people.
- Reduced loneliness and social isolation.

The literature shows that these outcomes may particularly be developed when participants socialise off the football pitch, in social sessions after a game, as well as through other social activities and having informal conversations via social media and text messaging – showing community membership extends beyond the sessions alone.

#### **4.5 Summary of the review**

This review provides some compelling and useful evidence around walking football interventions for older adults. The review demonstrates a wide range of considerations to be made by practitioners, funders and other stakeholders and partners in the design, development, and delivery of walking football interventions, including important considerations for how to make such interventions sustainable – engaging people to participate in the first place, and sustaining their participation longer term. The review highlights, however, some gaps in existing evidence and calls for further evidence to be developed around partnership working in the delivery of interventions, as well as highlighting a need for building further high-quality evidence around the outcomes of participation, particularly for mental wellbeing, individual development, and social and community development.

#### **4.6 References**

Collins, A., Coughlin, D., Miller, J., and Kirk, S. (2015). *The production of Quick Scoping Reviews and Rapid Evidence Assessments: A how to guide*. Available at:

[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/560521/Production\\_of\\_quick\\_scoping\\_reviews\\_and\\_rapid\\_evidence\\_assessments.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/560521/Production_of_quick_scoping_reviews_and_rapid_evidence_assessments.pdf)

EFDN. European Football for Development Network. (2017). *Walking football practitioners guide*.

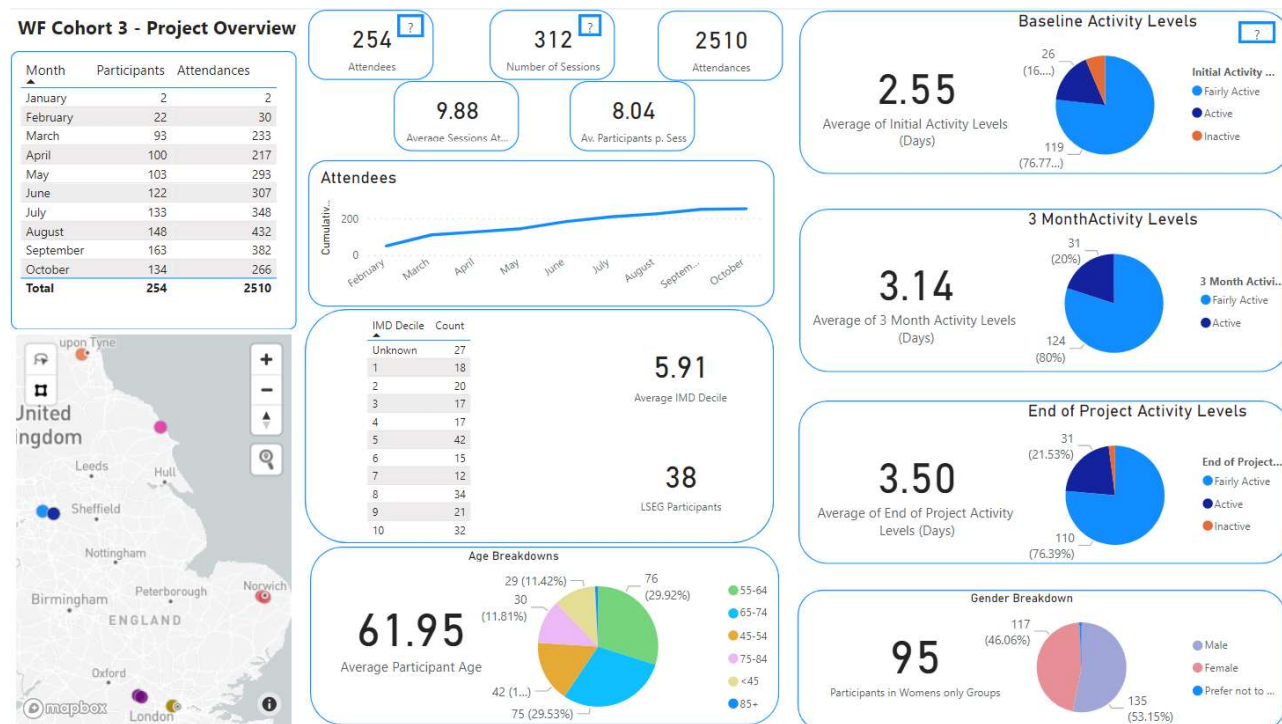
Available at: <https://www.efdn.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Walking-Football-Practitioners-Guide-1.pdf>

HM Government. (2015). *Sporting future: a new strategy for an active nation*. London: HM Government / DCMS.

## 5. REVIEW OF MONITORING DATA

Part of the programme monitoring process includes the creation of a 'project overview' dashboard, which aggregates the participant monitoring data submitted by local Age UK project leads. The final aggregated data is presented in Figure 3 below:

**Figure 3 Project overview dashboard**



**Figure 4 Project dashboard breakdown**

Local Age UK group	No. People	Attendances	No. Sessions	Ave attend.	Ave age	Min age	Max Age
Buckinghamshire Women	20	273	31	9	57	50	73
Buckinghamshire General	26	187	19	10	65	53	79
Gateshead LSEG	21	230	29	8	69	55	82
K&C General	17	135	15	9	74	60	86
K&C Female	18	235	29	8	72	62	83
Norwich LSEG 1	32	141	16	9	61	28	80
Norwich LSEG 2	34	98	11	9	66	38	80
NYC&M LTHC	9	45	14	3	65	52	74
NYC&M Female	18	119	32	4	59	49	76
Stockport LTHC	18	54	14	4	52	25	68
Stockport Female	10	240	34	7	42	19	65
Trafford General	23	458	36	13	66	47	79
Trafford Female	29	295	32	9	52	23	67

- The final project dashboard data shows that, cumulatively, there have been 254 participants join one of the 13 groups. This was over 100 people more than the 145 participants recruited by mid-June, and August, September and October recorded the highest number of participants across the monitoring period.
- The Age UK Norwich group 2 recorded the highest number of participants (34) and the Age UK Trafford (general) group recorded highest number of attendances (458).
- There have been 312 sessions delivered, creating 2,510 total attendances with an average of over 8 participants per session. This ranges from a maximum of 36 sessions (Age UK Trafford general group and 34 from Age UK Stockport female group), and 5 groups delivered more than 30 sessions. Those with the lowest number of sessions delivered were the ones that started later, or where venues were split as in Norwich.
- The average age is 62, however, as shown in Figure 4, five local Age UK sessions had under-40's recorded. The oldest participant is 86 from the Age UK Kensington and Chelsea's mixed group.
- A small majority (53%) of participants were male, (46% are female), and 95 participants joined a female only sessions. This means that 23 female participants have joined a 'mixed' group.
- There was a broad representation from participants from different IMD deciles, with an average classification of 5.9. Overall, 38 participants were from the most deprived 20% of households and 53 were from the least deprived 20%.
- Activity levels for participants providing data at the baseline showed that, on average, the 254 participants were "active" for 2.55 days, rising to 3.14 days at the 3-month marker, and 3.5 days at the end of the project. Overall, 10 participants were "inactive" at baseline (i.e., less than 30 minutes of activity per week, and this was 0% at the 3-month point).
- Additional analysis by the central Age UK team on the physical activity levels (which was not part of the independent evaluation) outlined that there was a statistically significant increase in participants' activity levels between baseline and the 3-month point (by 0.69 days). For those participants supplying activity data at baseline, 3-months and the end of the project, there is evidence that physical activity increased by an average of 1.42 days from baseline to the end of the project, which was also statistically significant ( $p < .001$ ).

## 6. SUMMARY OF PARTICIPANT FEEDBACK - COHORTS 1 & 2

Following the completion of Cohorts 1 & 2, participant surveys were completed by 318 of the 1,579 walking footballers (c. 20%) about their experience, and this section outlines the headline findings from those results. The headline feedback from participants from previous cohorts outlined that:

- The profile of respondents shows that the sample was predominantly male (76%), aged between 55-74 (80%), white British (95%) and just over half were living with a long-term health condition (54%).
- One-fifth felt COVID-19 impacted upon their experience (22%).
- 100% of respondents said they would recommend it to friends/family and 97% suggested they would continue playing, the experience had a positive impact.
- The majority (79%) rated their experience as "excellent" and a further 18% as "good".

- 85% of respondents stated that attending walking football had increased their physical activity levels, and 13% had maintained them. In addition, 82% reported an improvement in their physical health, 29% 'significantly' and 53% 'somewhat'.
- In a similar pattern to physical health, the majority of respondents reported an improvement in their mental wellbeing (78%) with 35% reporting a significant increase and 43% 'somewhat'. Just over half of respondents (52%) reported feeling more sociable since joining the group.
- In terms of enjoyment, the 'opportunity to keep fit and active' was the most cited (85%) followed by the 'opportunity to meet new people/socialise' (73%), 'I enjoyed playing in a match (friendly or competitive)' (63%) and 'I enjoyed being part of a team' (55%).
- Respondents were most likely to sign up for sessions by direct email (18%) or just turned up (17%). For signing up, by phone (17%) and via the FA Events Platform (online) (16%) were also cited. A small proportion signed up through their local Age UK website (5%).
- Suggested improvements were minor (in terms of proportion), with 'playing more friendly matches' (20%), 'playing more competitive matches' (16%) and 'more time to socialise before/after the sessions' (12%). Overall, 50% of respondents suggested no improvements were required.
- The vast majority of respondents outlined that the day / time was suitable (98%), although that was to be expected, as those respondents were able to attend the session at the time it was offered.

In summary, the quantitative feedback from participants from Cohorts 1 and 2 were very positive about their experience of the programme and the impact their participation had on health, wellbeing, and social connections.

## **7. HEADLINE FINDINGS: THREE RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

The headline results are themed into the three research questions, beginning with the methods to identify and engage older people, with partnership working second and the barriers and motivations to complete the results. Following this, discussion about the key learnings and a summary of the walking football project, cohort 3.

### **7.1. Identifying and engaging older people with walking football, and how successful or not have they been?**

What became clear very quickly is that every walking football group is different in the way that they were set up and developed, the format that they take, and how they have identified and engaged their target groups. This section demonstrates the different approaches taken, success factors and challenges, and highlights some key learning from across the groups.

#### **7.1.1 Set-up / development phase**

The target group each local Age UK was aiming to work with differed from general participation to female only, those with long-term health conditions and ethnic minority groups, therefore the way each project progressed through the development phase differed. Some local Age UKs had taken part in previous Cohorts of the Programme; therefore, some groups required more work than others to set up and understanding the nature of the local demand was an important part of the process.

*“For our female group, we had a small group of women that had already expressed interest and did not want a mixed session, specifically wanted women only for a non-competitive session. They had run a mixed session in the past which had not worked (particularly inside, due to quicker pace of play), so there were some women from this session that were keen to play. So, this session was already off to a flying start in comparison to the [ethnic minority group] session (where we were completely starting afresh without contacts, or any existing interest).”*

Project lead

As some local Age UKs in Cohort 3 also ran sessions in Cohort 1 and/or 2, and some did not, the level of understanding amongst project leads, local connections and things like referral pathways etc. also differed between groups.

*“This is our third cohort, I started mid-way through the second and so felt quite lucky that it wasn’t something starting from scratch. Really good relationships with local leisure centres which has helped with getting competitive rates for hall hire etc.”*

Project lead

*“Already had use of the venue from Cohort 2, had a chat with the manager, asked him if we could use the venue to run 2 sessions. Struggled a little bit with the ladies session which is aimed at perimenopausal / menopausal women – some of these ladies are working and so we wanted the session to be later so that they could still attend. The only slot I could get was 5pm-6pm. I have been in touch with the manager of the centre and its maybe that come September we can juggle things around and get a later slot.”*

Project lead

Making progress early with facilities, access to coaches and engaging with partners has been a key driver in sessions starting as planned, and not encountering delay. Project leads were clear that a lot of the early work surrounded these three areas, although they have seen varying levels of success, from some sessions starting in February, slightly earlier than planned as launches were expected to start in early March, and some just getting up and running in June. This is an important part of the process.

The suitability of the facility to create the environment required to deliver a positive experience is one of the fundamental parts of the programme, and project leads were keen to get this right.

*“Really useful to have trained staff and / or trained volunteers in early, we are trying to get this sorted still so we can ensure there is a sustainability element.”*

Project lead

Some project leads outlined that they had not delivered anything like this before, therefore they had to do some research about the programme and the local area, which was time consuming, whereas others had delivered in Cohorts 1&2 and had more knowledge and networks already developed. This meant not all local Age UKs were starting from the same point, which is an important consideration for funding new/existing groups and the time, funding and support required. From the ‘partner meetings’ that were organised by the Age UK Programme team, some leads have been offering advice to others and this support was valuable, but these conversations demonstrated that there was a vast difference in experience around delivering walking football across the different areas.

*“(I was) new into post in January after the application had been approved. Did plenty of research into the programme.”*

Project lead

*“It was about finding the time with my other commitments at the charity as well to set things up because we now run over 20 groups and that's split between two people. So, it's quite difficult to find the time to do risk assessments and buy all the equipment, do research, etc.”*

Project lead



## 7.1.2 Recruitment / promotion

The consultations with project leads outlined the importance of two key things (1) lots of participants promoting the sessions through word of mouth and (2) having session advocates as early adopters/ambassadors as attendees. Both were important to help to set the group going with a reliable and committed group of people which helps to create a viable group which provides a meaningful experience (and a reason to return) much quicker.

Some project leads have said they have not needed to promote the sessions too much, as their participants have brought people in with them.

*“Female group: To begin with, it started slowly, 2 or 3 at some of the initial sessions, but the numbers have built up and this has mostly been through word of mouth. Having those ambassadors who have been coming from the beginning, and can help us to promote through other networks, groups, friends, and family. We are regularly getting 11 or 12 at the sessions now and have 15 registered altogether.”*

Project lead

*“Originally promoted through existing groups to get things up and running, and there is a mix of those that do other Age UK groups and those that are new. For new participants, we try and make sure an existing member goes to talk to them on their first visit. We have had a lot of social media traffic (although conversions from interactions/reach into participants is significantly lower e.g., 3-4 people have joined via that route from over 700 weekly interactions).”*

Project lead

*“Tried many different ways to advertise, but word of mouth was the most effective.”*

Project lead

*“There have been quite a few people who have turned up because they've seen the poster in the local co-op. But I would say it is all well and good having all social media and internet presence, but word of mouth is, without a doubt, the most important thing, it is so much more powerful than reading and seeing it online.”*

Project lead

For most participants, word of mouth was most frequently mentioned as to how they had first heard about the walking football sessions. Often this had come from a friend or family member that had heard about the sessions or had been to the sessions themselves.

*“I came with a friend who was told by her support worker about the different walking sports. We came to the 1pm walking football and talking to other people, we found out about this one.”*

Participant

*“So, I got a text from my friend saying, ‘ooh I’ve seen an advert for walking football.’ Tuesday nights, and very near where I live, and she said, ‘do you fancy it?’ and I said, ‘ooh yeah, definitely’. So, I went along, and I forwarded it on to another friend as well who also lives nearby, and she said she was up for it too.”*

Participant

Some participants had also actively been looking for a walking football session and had made enquiries at local venues or searched online to find a local session. This was either due to a desire to try walking football, or due to having done walking football previously and wanting to find a new session.

*“When I moved back up here, I think through someone in the trust I got a contact for the women’s team, and I got in touch and emailed about it. So, I was really grateful to find it because I thought ‘I won’t be able to live without walking football’, it was so important to me.”*

Participant



*"I was looking to try it out and I asked at the centre if they were doing it, they said they were doing it so took my name and number and when it started, they got in touch with me."*

Participant

The interviews covered a range of avenues project leads have tried to develop, including promotion through social media, GP surgeries, community groups. Some areas have had a launch event, and others have made use of their partners' promotional avenues too.

*"Had some really strong promotional activities prior to launch using International Women's Day and the female group (matchdays matter with menopause) – the coach is female, and the Club have been very supportive."*

Project lead

*"It's about advertising to the right people – knowing what organisations to approach – it comes with knowledge and experience in the role."*

Project lead

*"No problem with the mixed session because they are predominantly men attending and they attend the session and are keen to get involved in more exercise. It hasn't been a problem to promote that session and encourage participants to come along."*

Project lead

In Buckinghamshire, the men's group attracted men with long-term health conditions and several of these had been signposted from other sport and activity sessions run by Age UK's delivery partner Wycombe Wanderers. For example, there was a session targeted at the same age group called 'fit fans', from which several walking football participants had been signposted.

Some areas had used social media to promote the sessions. It was found that Instagram was not particularly popular with the target age group, and this did not work, but Facebook was a more successful form of social media.

*"Our social media has had a massive impact, when you got to speak to people, a lot said they have seen this on Facebook, or somebody signposted to it. Our Page visits per day are about 500 now, so we have worked on this consistently. Social media doesn't always work on some older people but when I'm working with 50 plus, people that work, a lot of people do use social media and it has had an impact we have posted every week with details, how to get in touch, this is shared across the team and our receptionist knows all about it to signpost."*

Project lead

Some of the Age UK project leads discussed using social prescribing although this was not widely used. In one area, there were difficulties normally in being able to promote activities through GP surgeries, for example, it was difficult to get agreement for posters or leaflets to be displayed in waiting rooms. However, by linking with social prescribers and care coordinators, they were able to promote via the GPs, and this had been a successful way of recruiting. It was commented, however, that developing these relationships had taken time.

*"That has been really important in terms of promoting it and it has taken a long time, but we are starting to see that impact now towards the end of the project. This is why you need time for development, we already had those relationships but coming towards the end of the project and people are saying they have seen it in their GP surgery."*

Project lead

*"We know that social prescribers have referred people and some of the people that get involved in other activities have come in and wanted to volunteer, wanted to do fundraising to give back. They know a face in the office and know what is available and if they needed something, they've got a point of contact to access the different services we have. One of the volunteer coaches here works as a social prescriber."*

Project lead

In another area, the Age UK project lead is also a Social Prescriber for Age UK and commented that this was a really positive skillset when it came to encouraging people along to the sessions. Because she ran the sessions, she could really help communicate information about the groups because she knew what they were all about and who they were targeting.

*“People don’t always know what social prescribing is, but if you say, ‘why don’t you come along to walking football?’ that is something different and more relatable than saying ‘why don’t you go along to this group or that group?’”* Project lead

In other areas, there were also discussions about the way in which walking football is described in communications. For some, there were misconceptions about walking football, for example, people believed that it would be too slow, and not physical enough. It was clear that clarity in promotional materials about levels of previous experience and physical ability was needed.

*“The walking football part of it can be quite off-putting. There are quite a few lads who I have bought in out of the gym on the days where we have been short on numbers – I drag people out and they say, no, it’s not for me and I’m saying just give it a go. Everyone I have bought in has ended up being a regular, they are pleasantly surprised by it.”* Project lead

*“When you say walking football, they sometimes think they are a bit better than walking football, but it’s more physical than you realise, it’s a good work out.”* Project lead

### 7.1.3 Paid-for promotion via social media

Age UK paid for social media promotion in the August/September activities, and the statistics linked to engagement, and feedback from project leads was collected, as summarised below:

- Cost per click at £0.29 was within Age UKs average (£0.15 - £0.40).
- The promotion drove over 6,000 link clicks and could be attributed directly to people living in the target areas.
- The posts achieved over 6,000 engagements.
- There was an even split between males and females clicking through to the landing page. The largest driver of traffic was females aged over-65.
- The target audience for the campaigns was 55+, and the adverts were shared by an older audience to younger family members and friends.
- North Yorkshire Coast and Moors had the highest impressions (369,683) which was almost five times higher than the next highest (Stockport – 75,862).

Specific feedback from project leads ranged from the Facebook boosts being a very successful addition to the promotional offer (*“I have had 3 enquiries in the past couple of weeks about walking football so hopefully this is down to the social media posts”*) and *“we had a surge of 5 people signing up for the LTHC sessions which attracted men; the feedback from the facility said they had enquires from women under 50 that wanted to join the session”*. On the contrary, some project leads reported that very little changed *“I don’t think we can report any increased activity actually”* and *“I am afraid we haven’t received any increase”*. Finally, if paid-for promotions are taking place, Age UK could consider how to develop a joined-up marketing and promotion approach with the project leads, as one fed back *“I have had 5 or 6 new people and they all mentioned that they saw it via social media which I’m assuming is your post!”*. The data and feedback suggest that paid-for promotions can be a useful addition to the promotional mix, but are not something that works everywhere, and links in with the literature about a tailored approach to meet local demand. Feedback from project leads suggested that Facebook was the main social media by a fair distance, with Twitter and Instagram not gaining many interactions in comparison.

#### 7.1.4 Logistics (session type / structure / approach)

The interviews highlight that there is not a 'one size fits all' approach for the logistical approach to setting up and scheduling walking football. This is shown by the mix of indoor and outdoor, grass or artificial surface, day, time of day (daytime or evening) the level of competitiveness, and the mix of skills and drills versus playing matches, which all varies between groups. Some groups structure their sessions with longer warm-ups, and some skill-based activities, e.g., using the coaches to deliver (e.g., North Yorkshire Coast and Moors), rather than just playing games all the way through, which is the format that some participants have indicated that they prefer (e.g., Gateshead).

Different preferences were expressed for the format of the sessions in different areas, and coaches had adapted to the preferences of the group:

*"Not having a plan and playing things by ear, that is what has worked really well."*

Project lead

*"We do different exercises, it's not same, same, same. We learn a lot and the experience is very good."*

Project lead

*"Mixing it up in terms of the different physical activities, it can just keep your body on your toes. I guess when you're doing the same thing week in, week out in terms of drills, your body adapts quite well or you might be neglecting other little, you know, twist turns, muscles, that sort of thing. So yeah, the variety works really well."*

Project lead

*"I think coaching would be difficult as there is quite a wide spread of ability as well. So, it might not work. Plus, we've only got an hour and by the time you've warmed up and cooled down. I think we all go to play games of football at the end of the day."*

Project lead

When participants had wanted to be competitive, in one area there was an issue where taking part in a tournament was not something that had been accounted for in the budget.

*"We didn't take account really on our budget about the cost of enrolling our groups in tournaments. So, it's a lot of logistic things that we need to do is spending time and also like, sometimes they need transport or like, a minibus etc that we didn't account for."*

Project lead

The pre-existing stereotypes around walking football also meant that, in some areas, it was difficult to engage women, particularly in mixed sessions, and there was a preference for female only sessions in some areas.

*"One of my main challenges was getting women involved. I remember at one of the meetings someone from Age UK national asked us why there were no women attending and I said I just cannot get them involved, they like to do other activities and don't want to do football in all honesty. I badged it as a mixed group, and I am kind of a bit sad that no women came but I'm really happy because it is giving men that safe place."*

Project lead

#### 7.1.5 Scheduling (venue / time / day) and staff

Participants were asked to comment and provide feedback on the timing of sessions, the venue in terms of facilities and access, and the delivery staff. The findings around timing and venue demonstrate a mix of opinions and highlight the importance of listening to participants wants and needs.

In terms of timing, there were differing preferences, with those that were working generally preferring an evening session but people who were retired preferring a session during the daytime.

*"Much prefer it in the day, most of us are retired. Might not have been as attractive to join in the evening."* Participant

*"Through the day I could not come as I still work, location is great, and evening is fine."* Participant

There were differences of opinion in terms of venue. For some participants, the option to play on a 3G pitch gave feelings of authenticity, however there was a preference for playing indoors during poor weather. However, there was one area in which the participants did not want to play indoors and preferred to play outside regardless of weather conditions.

*"Venue is great, especially during the winter months. The others I play at are outdoors on the 3G and its great especially in summer, but this is good because it accommodates you all year round. Everybody is friendly, the staff are too. Indoor is a bonus as during winter don't think as many would want to play outside, especially if it is raining so it is ideal."* Participant

*"To me, football is outdoors. I think it would be quite a different game indoors."* Participant

*"Fresh air, it's nice to be out. Working at home all day, it's nice to be outside."* Participant

Access to the venue was an issue for some participants and being in an accessible location with parking was important. In some areas, the coaches or other participants would give people a lift if they had struggled to get there otherwise.

*"There aren't really any facilities other than the pitch and the car park, but there is parking, it's easy to get to, and the pitch is really good."* Participant

*"Had it been daytime it would not have bothered me but support of the other two was more important than the time. It being evening and being dark was a big barrier to get over but glad I did it as now I know where to go and when. Transport was a main issue."* Participant

*"I have carers and I don't know what time they come and then you can't go in the afternoon. So evening is good, it is just some of the transport links are not great, buses in Scarborough are not great but the coaches now give us lifts."* Participant

In one area the participants commented on the lack of social space at the venue.

*"It would be nice if there was a bar or café area at the venues. This is something that we are missing, and if we had this, it would complete the package, enabling the socialisation time too."* Participant

Coaches were described as needing to be welcoming and friendly, and encouraging for people of all abilities, and the participants described the coaches as being very supportive.

*"They are nice people who look after us, and if you do something well you can hear 'well done', and I don't do it very often, so I hear it when they say it. It is well presented and well organised."* Participant

*"I think [the coach] is a very fair person, and you can go to him and talk to him. You know, if you're not coming or something's wrong or something's up with you, you know you feel like you can. He's very good in that respect and he's good at organising us all."* Participant

*“It was just really welcoming. And I think that’s really important because I think it could be quite intimidating. But it hasn’t been at all. It doesn’t matter who you are and what skills you have or haven’t got.”*

Participant

*“She welcomes anybody, whatever shape or form. She’s helpful with everything – if you have a problem / if you want any information you can go to her.”*

Participant

*“We have all female coaches to create the best space for women to play.”*

Participant

In some areas, the project lead had a presence and attended the sessions on a regular basis, to help with organisation and logistics, and to be able to greet and engage new participants. This helped to build relationships and ensure that participants were happy and able to provide feedback. In one area, the project lead was unable to attend sessions and felt this had had a negative impact.

*“If you are looking to get things off of the ground, if you are looking to set something up and create something, I think you need your own touch on it, at least for the first couple of months – to create a community. I think some of our objectives didn’t resonate with the coach delivering and because I was unable to attend, I think perhaps some of the objectives of the sessions were lost.”*

Project lead

As part of the process, ensuring that there is a level of knowledge about the walking football offer from the facility staff is important, to enable them to pass on enquiries, follow up with enquiries, and know how to signpost, and something that was patchy from the session we observed in Sheffield during the preparation phase. One participant noted that they had registered their details in Gateshead, and they got back in touch with him when they had a start date, which shows how it can work well.

### **7.1.6 Things that were tried but did not generate much traction**

Local Age UKs found that they had to re-think some of their approaches around promotion and recruitment, particularly if the efforts early in the process did not generate a core group of participants.

- The time of year, launching a group in February when it was still dark was not easy for promoting an evening session taking place outdoors.
- Of the social media platforms, Instagram and Twitter did not generate as much interest as Facebook, which was the primary avenue used for social media promotion.
- Some project leads found that when they promoted the session to other Age UK groups, there was a stereotypical view that football is ‘just for men’, and this was more evident than anticipated. The promotion for the programme had to be geared more towards changing this perception and breaking down some pre-conceptions.
- Where a walking football session ran before/after a junior session, some leads tried promoting it to parents/grandparents who take their children to this session, but this did not work very well as they would have had to arrive a lot earlier or take the children home.
- Although programme drop-out was not widespread, project leads suggested most participants fell into one of three groups, (1) the core group, (2) those with longer term but sporadic attendance, (3) those that tried it once or twice and did not come back. Generating people from group (1) early was important so that new members were joining something that delivered a better experience, especially those wanting to play a game.

- Realisation that promotion and recruitment needed to consider how to attract people who are a little bit younger than some other groups, when participants might be still quite active. Keeping people participating for longer, with a longer-term view was important, but more challenging within 8-10 months of delivery, especially with widely different ability levels.

### 7.1.7 Key learning

- There is no ‘one-size-fits all’ approach to the design and delivery of walking football sessions, and as a result, it is important to allow plenty of time for market research, to develop an understanding of local needs and demand, as well as planning, set up and development. Some areas may need more time than others depending upon previous experience, e.g., in areas where walking football is new / staff are new. Advice from one Age UK project lead was *“Don’t underestimate the amount of time needed for this. To get to know what people want, to consider what will work, and to take time for marketing and promotion.”*
- Different methods of recruitment have different levels of success depending upon the target group and local area. For example, social media was an important tool for promotion in some areas, but less so in others. Likewise, social prescribing was useful in referring participants for some sessions, but it had not been used in other areas. Signposting from other local sessions was important in some areas. It is clear, however, that promotion through word of mouth and having advocates within the sessions was important, in most areas.
- Being very clear on skill levels and who the sessions are aimed at is important – for example, people need to know the age range, if you need previous experience, whether sessions are mixed gender. There appear to be some pre-existing assumptions about what walking football involves and who it is aimed at, so marketing and promotion therefore needs careful consideration and needs to be very clear.
- There are different preferences on session formats, venues and timing etc. As part of the planning and development phase, it is important to listen to the needs of target groups and be flexible in designing sessions that meet their needs and wants. In some areas, participants preferred training and drills, and in others the participants wanted to play more competitively. Being able to signpost participants to more suitable provision may also be important if they find that the session is no longer appropriate for them.
- Whilst there are many different preferences, there was a consensus around staff being very supportive, and this being valuable to participants. In areas where the Age UK lead also had a presence at sessions, this worked well to help engagement.

## 7.2. Working with other organisations

One of the expectations from the grant application process was that local Age UKs would outline the partners they planned to engage with. Figure 1 (above) outlines the headline partners included in the process so far. This list is shorter than it was in the interim report as some of those expected partners did not end up being involved, or their involvement was not as a direct partner to this project.



### ***Different types of partnership working***

The level of partnership working has varied between local Age UKs, with some areas having their partners embedded at the start as part of the application process (e.g., Age UK Buckinghamshire with Wycombe Wanderers). Others have developed new partnerships, having not applied to be funded with a specific partner in mind (e.g., Age UK North Yorkshire Coast and Moors with Scarborough Athletic FC). In the Age UK Trafford project, they worked with their County FA in the application process, and some aspects of the direct delivery in the initial stages. For the other local Age UKs, partners tended to be involved in providing a coach for the delivery of walking football or taking a more peripheral role providing promotional support (marketing, referral, signposting).

The breadth and depth of partnership working has varied quite considerably. The partnership working activities could be categorised as:

- (1) one-off/single element instances
- (2) more consistent support with promotion/signposting/referral and
- (3) delivery partners/operational involvement and there to sustain the project.

However, there has not been a common process or pattern to developing partnerships, and it has depended on the needs of the local Age UK, their access to facilities and coaches, and the experience (or not) of delivering physical activity interventions and existing relationships with physical activity providers. Different local Age UKs approached the set-up phase differently depending on their experience of running physical activity interventions before, for example the Age UK project lead in Gateshead was trained in leading different physical activities and was comfortable setting walking football up based on that experience of delivering physical activity interventions. Some projects had existing partnerships for delivery from previous walking football cohorts e.g., Age UK Buckinghamshire, and some had partners with facility links e.g., Age UK Kensington and Chelsea. Some project leads were less experienced in setting up and delivering physical activity interventions, and some had little knowledge about football.

#### **7.2.1 Activities: Things that worked well / main successes**

##### ***(1) One off / single element partners***

The consultations with project leads outlined the various examples of one-off events or engagements that involved partners or other organisations, that were 'nice to have' rather than a substantive element of delivery. Examples of these types of partnership involvement included:

- The Age UK Trafford ladies entered into a tournament, and also had access to some menopause workshops, where sports bras were provided.
- Age UK North Yorkshire Coast and Moors ladies team launched their groups on International Women's Day with local media present and played a game against a group from Leeds later in the year.
- Age UK Norwich had an 'open day', which was free of charge, and used as an opportunity for participants to meet players from other walking football groups and socialise, whilst awards were also presented.
- Age UK Kensington and Chelsea got to meet England Lioness Lauren James doing a photoshoot on the next pitch.
- Age UK Gateshead had a mini tournament with employees from Sky TV on one of their community volunteer days.



*“The County FA had a pot of funding [that is separate to the Age UK Walking Football Programme] to deliver women’s recreational football opportunities and aimed to use some of this funding to invest in the development and expansion of Age UK Trafford’s group which had been set up for Menopausal women - it led to having people come in to deliver menopause workshops and the ladies also all received a free sports bra.”*

Project lead

*“We work closely with Sky [outside of the Age UK Walking Football Programme], and they have got to do so many volunteering days each year. They come to a lot of our groups, and we launched walking football and a few of the younger ones came and volunteered and made a mini tournament that the gents enjoyed.”*

Project lead

All of the above examples were positive additions to the programme for the participants but are not the types of activities which generates long-term participation or sustainability. They are important add-ons, and can generate content for promotional material, but they are not fundamental to good partnership working when setting up new groups.

## ***(2) Promotion and referral partners***

Much of the partnership working has been linking in with local organisations for marketing/promotional purposes and also to access organisations which have the ability and mechanisms to signposting/refer people into walking football. As outlined in the promotion section, some (not all) of the local Age UK project leads discussed using social prescribing and some outlined that there are difficulties getting access to promote activities through GP surgeries, even just placing posters or leaflets in waiting rooms. However, some areas have existing links with social prescribers and care coordinators, and they were able to promote via the GPs.

Linking up different local partners overlaps with promotional activity, and the feedback outlines that success depends on whether there are existing relationships in place for referral and promotion, particularly with only 8-10 months of delivery planned. For some local Age UKs, they used their existing networks so that walking football became another option on the opportunities available locally, for example in Gateshead:

*“We have good links locally. When we set any group up, we email all the GP surgeries around that area, so we did get some referrals from GPs and adult social care team, who we work quite closely with, especially the dementia links team. There were 1-2 with early diagnosis of dementia and they came in through that route. We use existing good connections for promotions/pathways.”*

Project lead

*“In Stockport, close relationships have been formed with GP practices and practice nurses to ensure they are aware of the work that is taking place and the sessions that are scheduled for walking football. We have tried to promote the service in different ways and create gateways. This has worked well for us in Stockport.”*

Project lead

Finally in this section, some of the partnership working has been linked to other organisations and services. Accessing walking football through Age UK can be a conduit into the services of other organisations who are partners.

*“One of the most positive aspects is partnership working with Keira’s Kingdom – they are an organisation who work with people who do slip through the cracks and do not get the support they need. She is a counsellor, so it is like a sports session and a counselling session in one. Felt like the stars aligning when this extra funding came along, and they were looking for some funding to get a programme going. Our work has been getting the equipment and facilities right. The charity has sorted the coach. In this day and age adult social care is quite bad, so it is about*

*creating an opportunity for people. We are combining all these things that are going to help a certain group and you can see by the attendance that it is working. It gives me immense pride and makes me feel like these are the people we really should be targeting and who need it the most, who won't get that opportunity unless we are willing to give it to them."* Project lead

One issue cited in some of the focus groups and the project lead interviews was about the number of people in the sessions and balancing that to ensure the sessions remains of good quality, as very successful promotion may end up with too many people taking part! If too many people were recruited, safety aspects would have to be introduced, for example having a limit on the number of people who could play at one time, especially with those using indoor facilities with concrete walls.

*"Due to the partnership and the people the charity were in touch with, they were able to spread the word about the ladies football group and the group had regular, good attendances throughout and did not have the need to do any further advertising of the session as there was a danger it would become too big a group."* Project lead

The research process also investigated whether there were examples of participants joining walking football, and then being signposted out of the group to other Age UK services or groups. Examples of this were quite limited, with some participants in Age UK North Yorkshire Coast and Moors joining the Age UK walking group, some participants in Gateshead joining other walking football groups (not related to Age UK), and two participants from Age UK Norwich were on the verge of joining an art club. A sample of participants from Age UK Kensington and Chelsea had taken part in other Age UK led physical activity sessions, including cricket, yoga, chair based exercise, stretching, and dancing, however this engagement was not because of being signposted to these sessions following their involvement in walking football, they were already doing it.

*"My friend and I have just signed up to do an arty thing. They have got one group, and there's a second group starting next week because it was popular. It is a two-hour thing and you just do different sort of art and craft activities. It's just once a month and I think it's limited to about eight people. I should imagine you sit around a table like this and have a natter."* Participant

*"We have seen a cross pollination between activities, we've actually at least a couple of the women's group join the walking group. But they are with the other people that have retired. If they work, then they struggle to get to it. One lady who did work couldn't get there often."*

Project lead

*"It has given me the confidence to attend other groups as well, I am going to another social group now, I would never have done that before."*

Participant

*"We have transitioned 3 participants into other Age UK North Yorkshire Coast & Moors groups (Walking Group) and their activity levels have gone up by 3 hours a week."*

Project lead

However, the focus groups did not generate many examples of being signposted to other Age UK services or groups, and a couple of project leads suggested that this may be due to the age of a high proportion of the participants being younger than those participants in other groups. Particularly for males in the 50-65 age range, it was suggested that a lot of the other local Age UK provision was populated by females aged 70+ and those referrals may not have been appropriate for males in that group. There were some examples of referral of players on from walking football to other local provision, but not necessarily Age UK services, as outlined by Age UK Buckinghamshire:

*“(We can refer into the) local walking football league (which) offers the pathway for women to play competitively. For most of our participants, they are fine as they are, they enjoy being active and have fun at the sessions and are picking up skills, but do not want to take the step to being in a competitive league. Which is fine. There is absolutely no pressure to join a team. But there may be the odd one or two that wish to go down that route.”*

Project lead

### **(3) Partners involved in delivery and sustainability**

Where partners were more involved, this was directly through either (1) operational support such as facility-hire, or (2) delivery support, providing access to existing workforce expertise such as coaching. Two local Age UK's (Buckinghamshire and North Yorkshire Coast and Moors) developed a very 'hands-on' relationship with their partners, and the relationship was formed as part of the sustainability plan post-October 2023.

*“We worked closely with Scarborough Athletic Football Club, as we use their facility as the venue, and they were very keen to help us get set up. We agreed start dates with them, times, publicity strategy, marketing, finance, support, people, and venue with them. We had a really strong launch on International Women's Day.”*

Project lead

*“Partnership working has enabled us to use each other's strengths. Wycombe Wanderers have the skills, the coaches, and the experience of running walking football sessions. Age UK has the networks and partnerships with other services that target these demographics. We have complemented each other well. For Age UK, we have played down our role in this, the use of Wycombe Wanderers is the appeal to a lot of participants, the links with the professional club, rather than the link with Age UK. And that is OK because ultimately it has enabled us to target those groups of people, who might never have come had it been marketed differently.”*

Project lead

Some other local Age UKs have accessed support of coaches from a partner, which enabled the sessions to have a good standard by having someone qualified in football delivery to lead the session and bring a level of expertise to the session:

*“[The paid coach] comes to the venues. We pay £30 an hour for a paid coach, and it is really helpful to have him on board because he will do all the warm-ups whilst I do the paperwork. If something appears on the forms saying that they get dizzy after half an hour walk, we make sure in the warm-up they get drink, we do regular breaks, and if they feel dizzy or anything, they stop and have a bit of a breather.”*

Project lead

*“We have worked closely with Chelsea FC foundation. A coach comes to deliver the sessions which has been invaluable in terms of the quality of the delivery. The venue is really accommodating and helpful.”*

Project lead

Where existing relationships were in place, this really strengthened the ability to develop a sustainable partnership, and some local Age UKs had this from previous cohorts of walking football. This was not consistent across all 8 local Age UKs involved.

*“Age UK [Buckinghamshire] and Wycombe Wanderers working together, and this partnership established a couple of years ago, delivering walking football sessions in previous cohorts. Other partners are community groups, leisure centres, local football deliverers, local football leagues, GPs. Raising awareness, signposting in either direction. Encouraging them to signpost to us, but also signposting participants to other sessions that they might attend.”*

Project lead

Others saw the Age UK led session become more popular than some other walking football options locally, and the partner providing the coaches and the council worked together to try and raise numbers, as the example from Age UK Gateshead shows.

*"[We worked with] Gateshead Football Club and the Football Foundation because we bring in one of their coaches. We have connections within the council who run other Walking Football programmes, and because ours was more successful than theirs, they started signposting people to us."*

Project lead

Some partnerships also developed much later in the process as local Age UKs develop their sustainability options. Age UK Stockport is a good example of this, working with the men's mental health charity 'Banter and Brews', who came to sessions in September and October, which has led to a 10-week extension with support from Age UK Stockport to boost the early weeks. Having an existing social group link in with the activity element has been a good addition to their offer, and Age UK Stockport have helped to facilitate this and develop another local partner and make a sustainable walking football group for men in the area.

To finish this section, it is useful to showcase one project where a partnership was set up from the beginning, within the timeframe allocated for cohort 3, and where the partner has taken the project on from a sustainability point of view.

### **7.2.2 Partnership working: A mini case study from North Yorkshire Coast and Moors**

In terms of developing a walking football session with no existing partnerships in place, North Yorkshire Coast and Moors has been an excellent example of combining a partner organisation with football-specific knowledge, with Age UK NYC&M's network, referral, and promotion expertise. The partnership between Age UK North Yorkshire Coast and Moors was set up as a new venture having never worked with each other before. After making initial contact, Scarborough Athletic Football Club (SAFC) brought their football delivery knowledge and access to facilities to combine with the Age UK NYC&M brand, access to a network of people and promotional avenues to create a new venture.

*"Building of the partnership with SAFC, the initial part of working together, and then getting the female team and sessions running has been really successful."*

Project lead

The partnership was driven initially by Age UK North Yorkshire Coast and Moors who had the funding from Age UK to get things up and running, and the plan was to work with the partner and for them to sustain it once the funding finished, and this has worked. The project started with the end in mind, very much focussed on what would happen in October.

*"A lot of it has been equal interest but driving the project to meet funding requirements is mostly from Age UK. Over time this has changed as SAFC are going to sustain the project, I set that up at the beginning and we started with the end in mind. They knew that by working together there was an expectation that they would sustain it and every step of it had that sustainability in mind."*

Project lead

The partners from Scarborough Athletic also reflect on the setting up of a new partnership:

*"We have not worked with Age UK NYC&M before. We were contacted by Age UK [NYC&M] with a view to working together for females and we had experience of putting together a walking football group for men, we had a great venue and knowledge of what it takes to set up a group which is crucial. The partnership works well for the Club as we begin our journey with the newly established Community Trust."*

SAFC Community

Having a partner with the specific knowledge of how to set up and a run a walking football group was vital, especially when the experience of project leads around the delivery of physical activity interventions may vary. With each organisation having different skill sets, and working in different elements of the community, the new partnership has developed well.

*"It has given Age UK an "in" with SAFC as they on their own would not have done the same job - we are very much engaging with people that they may not be i.e., obsessive football fans. We have recruited people who may not be traditionally confident about tuning up at a football club."*

Project lead

Having a local and high-quality facility was also important.

*"(When we played a match) the opposition said how good our facilities were as they play on a school field with no floodlights, and if you had asked me to come with muddy grass, with nowhere to get changed, that would have been too much for me. "*

Participant

There have been challenges working with a partner that runs a busy football facility with the suitability of the environment something to consider. The ladies group moved nights to a slot when it was not being used by a local 6-a-side league. The suitability of the environment is an important factor as much as the quality and suitability of the venue. The links with a football club also opened opportunities to access local coaches who could run the sessions, and then be part of the sustainability planning process. Having an all-female coaching team for the female group was also important.

*"The fact that we have an all-female coaching team is great. The setting up of that evening session and the excitement around it being an all-female opportunity (helps to) address some of the inequality in football."*

Project lead

The coaches have been a significant factor in the sustainability element, someone to oversee the session, to act as a link with the club, and to ensure safety and fun are maintained. The coaches linked to the group also reflected on their positive experience and developing their skills.

*"I reflected after the last focus group on the impact that this group has had, and I look forward to it, it is my favourite session of the week, it is relaxed, we have a good laugh. I forget about all the other stuff that is going on, it is our hour to play. Great to see how everyone has come on since they first started."*

Coach 1

*"I have done my coaching badge, and I am a lot more confident delivering sessions having worked with the other coaches. My coaching has definitely improved."*

Coach 2

The culmination of this partnership work is the impact and difference it has on the participants, who spoke with great enthusiasm about the positive impact joining the group has had on their life.

*"I hadn't played before, there is always somebody there to encourage you, always someone to say, "go on, have another go". My confidence through playing has improved."*

Participant

*"When I first started, I was coughing a lot, but it is noticeable that I am coughing a lot less since starting. Improved my health."*

Participant

*"Before our match, I didn't sleep for two nights! I was terrified and there would be men playing too but I did it and it was the best day ever. We played to the proper rules, so the referees had their moments!"*

Participant

*"At the start I would not have thought I would become a "poster woman" for the project. I did not like going out of the house at dark, had my friend not asked me, I did not want to let my friend down more than wanted to play football. My grandchildren think I am marvellous! They*



*go round telling everybody that grandma plays football! I nutmegged somebody in a match, and I did not even know what it was, but I did it apparently!"* Participant

Thinking about the future, beyond the end of the Age UK funding, the sessions are continuing. The key to this was having that plan from the outset, around leaving a core group of people, a stable facility booking and a small pot of funding to help maintain activities.

*"The small amount of money paid every week, has been handed over to the club so they have a cushion of funding for those days when they might not have enough people to cover the cost of the pitch. SAFC are taking no money out to sustain it, they do it as volunteers. As Age UK are about to leave it, they have marketing and promotion, a core of people and a cushion of funding just to tide them over. We will still promote and signpost people to it."* Project lead

SAFC also reflected on their experience, and how that looks in the future.

*"Working with Age UK NYC&M has extended our reach and has been a very positive experience and one which we would welcome again. The experience has largely been a positive one to build on for future initiatives, and we would look to collaborate again. The future of walking football in terms of sustainability after Age UK stops the formal funding of the sessions looks good. We have previously looked at starting a women's group but the intervention from Age UK has been significant in pulling a group together, we will continue to develop the group and build on the positive start that has been made."* SAFC Community

### **7.2.3 Things that did not work as well / main challenges**

The project leads identified a small number of challenges with regards to partnership working, but mainly around operational challenges, or them not being involved as expected. This is particularly pertinent in the case of Age UK West Sussex, where they faced difficulties in sourcing a partner with localised expertise to drive engagement.

#### ***Timeframe / capacity building***

When setting up a walking football programme from the ground, without existing partners or groups established, it was acknowledged that 8-10 months is on the short side, to set up partners, find a venue, promote, and recruit, and then develop a viable group to then sustain.

*"You need more of a lead time to build that relationship and partnership and understanding. There is never enough time we always accept that. The actual delivery time of the project needs to be longer. Our partner had an existing male walking football team, they said it takes about a year to establish a session, and we have not had a year."* Project lead

*"In terms of our input and support it has been intense. (If you) have that year you find a stable place, time, day and your core group develops because as we know it's not the same people every week, it's not competitive sports with people turning up there every week and training to become fitter, they are going to be social, have fun, talk to each other so you need that time to develop that core of regulars (10 to 12 people), with probably about 20 people involved at a time and you probably need that 12 months to get to that position."* Project lead

#### ***County FA involvement***

The initial partner mapping suggested that some of the County FAs would be involved in the project, although their exact role was not determined, which *could* be advising through to delivery partners. Some local Age UKs outlined that they had *"not been in contact with anyone like that"* or that *"we had very little to do with other sport governing bodies or the County FA"*. It was not a pre-determined requirement to involve the County FA, but for those local Age UKs with little prior

experience of delivery of a football-based project, it was envisioned that they may be a good source of support, but very few projects used their County FA, and where they did, it was relatively minor involvement, albeit a helpful option in some local areas.

*“We have a relationship with the Manchester FA (Women’s recreational football officer). She has been along to a few sessions (and helped us to) enter a football tournament when we were only 6 weeks into the project, and we came fourth. Really proud moment.”*

Project lead

The planned project in Age UK West Sussex, Brighton and Hove had an issue in establishing their sessions. After successfully developing previous walking football groups, their efforts to establish a group during Cohort 3 did not materialise as their key contact had changed roles and was unable to support the promotion of the programme in the same manner. Previously they had been working with Brighton and Hove Albion’s Women’s Development Officer alongside some motivated volunteers that resided in the local area. This Women’s Development Officer moved to a county-wide role with Sussex County FA and could not provide that localised support. In trying to establish the sessions it became apparent that having a key individual on the ground in the immediate local area was crucial to the success of the programme, and despite their best efforts they did not find a suitable partner to support them.

*“What we needed was someone in the locality. So, I engaged them [Sussex County FA] to deliver and help us advertise. But what we did not have was a person who will help to drive and have a vested interest in it, and I think that’s the key for the success of the other two [Cohorts].”*

Project lead

### ***Importance of place***

Of the projects planned, not all 14 started on time as planned. Five groups were not in a position to host a focus group before the submission of the interim report in June with four of those groups encountering a delayed start. The issues for this were mainly due to low numbers or issues with facility availability. The venue used for walking football is vital and securing a regular time slot in a suitable facility was (in many cases) the difference between starting delivery in February-April or being delayed until June/July. Even those projects that secured venues early encountered some issues which affected participation, such as having to change the day in Age UK North Yorkshire due to the environment and having two different venues on alternate weeks in Age UK Norwich. Consistency of day, time and venue is important for promotional purposes, but also to ensure participants can embed their attendance into their weekly routine. The second group in Age UK Kensington and Chelsea was delayed due to issues sourcing a venue, and much of the disruption to the timeline came from not having a venue booking.

The example from Age UK North Yorkshire Coast and Moors (below) was especially pertinent when setting up a female group, with many participants that had not played football before requiring a supportive environment to break the barrier of starting. The coaches did this, and the partner facilitated a move to a different session day and time, although this meant some participants could not do the new day and/or time.

*“The biggest learning curve was the availability of a suitable space to play, not just that but the impacts of seasons and Academy use. If I had known that from the beginning, I would have started on a different day. I would have set up from the beginning at a time and place where there was no conflict with anything else. When our women’s group started, they were getting abuse from other users (playing in the commercial 6-a-side league which shared the space), and it was ridiculous really.”*

Project lead



Consistency of the session scheduling is an important aspect, therefore changing it due to circumstances out of the direct control of the project was not ideal. Alternatively, the facility used by Age UK Gateshead was an indoor space with exclusive use for the group and demonstrated the difference the facility had in terms of setting up a group and recruiting numbers early in the process.

### *Process / logistics*

With each local Age UK receiving central funding to set-up and deliver walking football from Age UK, there were procedural requirements attached to ensure the registers and monitoring reports were completed. For some, this was reported as either time consuming, or a lot of chasing partners / coaches for the information.

*“If you are working with a partner, getting the paperwork done, (is a challenge), I have to email frequently to make sure it is done. This happens with any partner, but the time consumed for me has been so much more than expected probably double what we expected and that is just because any of the issues or hiccups, I have to drive it and in the second half of the project it took up a lot of time (e.g. returning registers).”* Project lead

### **7.2.4 Key learning**

- The amount of time required to set up a brand-new partnership can be longer than the 9-10 months afforded to it on cohort 3. Unless the partner is secured early, a large part of the delivery phase can be taken up with planning, as building relationships and understanding with new partners takes time. For future cohorts, applicants should have a confirmed partner before the commitment of central funds, to ensure projects can maximise delivery time with a facility, a strategy for promotion and operations, and a plan for sustainability clearly built into the application. Where possible, this partner should have a more substantial role than just providing a facility or access to a coach.
- Partnership working, particularly where the **partnership is built with a plan for the project beyond any grant funding**, can significantly improve sustainability of projects. Examples from Age UK North Yorkshire Coast and Moors and Buckinghamshire adopted a model where the partner was involved with a clear remit to sustain the project, and local Age UKs handed the project over to them, with local Age UKs remaining as an organisation that referred people into it still.
- Where partnerships were transactional in cohort 3 (i.e., a facility hire booking or use of a coach), the level of strategic partnership working was limited. In some instances, sessions were provided for free, and a charge was immediately introduced once Age UK funding ceased, and this was not clearly articulated to participants. Although participants said cost was not a barrier and they would be prepared to pay, the project continues with no direct delivery partner, no clear responsibility for ownership (e.g., collecting money etc.) and no pot of funding to cover any weeks with lower numbers.
- Notwithstanding the point above, it is important that projects have a partner (or at least a confirmed booking) with a facility to host the sessions. Some of the projects were delayed starting due to not having a suitable facility and this reduced the number of delivery weeks available. Without a place to play, the networks, promotion, referrals etc. are restricted as potential participants are made to wait. The venue should also be consistent (place, day, time, surface, indoor/outdoor) and where possible not be split over two venues on alternate weeks or have changes to the day/time (although some of these changes were required due to the environment). Consistency of a venue booking, which

is protected by a partner, is vital. There are, however, inconsistencies in demand (indoor v outdoor; 4G v grass) and therefore some demand will be unmet based on the facility but canvassing demand from potential participants prior to making a booking may mitigate some of this.

The literature review found very little evidence specifically around partnership working in the development or delivery of walking football interventions, or in engaging and sustaining older people in walking football participation. Examples that were available in the literature did not describe how these relationships worked in practice. The one that did (EFDN, 2017) described successful partnership working as key for delivery of interventions and the sustainability of programmes, and the examples from cohort 3 align to this, as the projects with strong partnerships embedded in the sustainability element have all the tools required to sustain. Literature also determined that participants are key partners that should have an important role in the design and planning of the programme, and project leads have listened to their participants around venue (indoor/outdoor), day, time, and whether the session should be skills or games. Each project runs differently depending on the needs of the participants, and there are some good examples of sustainability being a prominent element of the planning process.

### 7.3. Motivations and barriers for participating and sustaining engagement

#### 7.3.1 Motivations

A variety of different motivations for taking part in walking football were given by participants across the focus groups. These included previous participation in football (both running and walking formats of the game), being football fans, wanting to get fit or improve overall health and wellbeing as well as rehabilitation and the opportunity to socialise.

**Previous participation in football** – Due to age or ability levels, many participants felt that the walking format would be a more suitable level of play, whilst still providing an opportunity to take part in a sport they enjoyed.

*“I used to play a lot of football and rugby, but I am a bit too old for rugby, my grandsons ask if I still play, and I always said ‘no’ but now I can tell them ‘Yes I do play football’.* Participant

*“Good opportunity, always wanted to try it and I used to play years ago, seen walking football on TV and fancied giving it a go. Never done it before, played general football 20 years ago.”* Participant

*“I used to play with the lads at work in my early 20’s ... I stopped when my job meant I was travelling all the time so I could not do it anymore. So, I have not played at all for about 15 years, so I was really pleased when I saw this. I have bad knees, so I have to be careful now. Although I played a lot when younger, I have never had any formal training or any proper coaching on how to kick the ball, so it’s nice to find out how to do it properly.”* Participant

**Being football fans** and having that general interest in football was another motivation, especially where walking football may have been connected to a football club, it created a feeling of being part of something for participants who had been lifelong fans.

*“I think anyone that really knows me isn’t really that surprised that I do it because they know how mad I am about football. I’m a big football fan. It’s a part of our family life.”* Participant

**Improvements to health** and the potential physical health benefits of participation in walking football were mentioned by a number of participants.

*“For me, I want to keep fit because I’m getting older, I want to keep moving, because working from home I stiffen up. So, I want to be able to move and keep moving so I feel the benefits as I continue getting older.”* Participant

Some participants with injuries, illnesses or limiting conditions, including self-referrals had seen walking football as having potential health benefits in their **rehabilitation** or recovery.

*“Helped with my rehabilitation, rather than sitting at home, it helped because then I got motivated to do a lot more stuff.”* Participant

*“I enjoy it because my left knee is a little bit of a problem. But now it’s much better as a result of playing football.”* Participant

*“I’m diabetic. The government said I need to do a lot more exercise.”* Participant

*“I was ill last year, I got sepsis because my appendix burst. I didn’t want to go to the gym and do something on my own, but it was like trying to get my body to move again, so it wasn’t so stiff and then I got talking to a friend and she encouraged me to come along to walking football and I’m doing alright now, I can move much better. It’s been great for me; it’s done everything for me.”* Participant

*“I came from pulmonary rehab; the first time I came I managed a minute and that was me done. Now I’m playing twice a week for an hour at a time.”* Participant

**Opportunity to socialise** and meeting new people was mentioned by several participants as a motivating factor to get involved, there was a sense that it provided a purpose to the week.

*“Something to do when you are retired and you find yourself stuck in the house with not much to do, especially through winter, so I thought I would try it.”* Participant

*“I thoroughly enjoy it; it gets you out of the house with something to do and look forward to instead of just sitting in the house.”* Participant

### 7.3.2 Benefits / outcomes

The outcomes and benefits that participant had experienced were extremely positive despite the variances in the amount of time they had actually been playing walking football. Positive outcomes were noted, even if they had only been playing for a short period of time. The outcomes described were all consistent with the findings of the literature review, and predominantly focused on physical health, mental wellbeing, individual development, and social and community development.

**Physical health** – A number of participants described that they felt fitter and healthier since starting walking football, and some even commented that they had lost weight and had more energy which was having a knock-on effect in improving their ability in other physical activities, for example, being able to walk for longer periods of time or playing longer games of walking football.

*“My belt buckle has gone from the second buckle to the third, so definitely lost a little bit of weight, and feel a lot fitter. I had run down my activities after retiring and only did a bit of Tai Chi which is not overly physical, and this came just at the right time.”* Participant

*“It is nice to have the Wednesday to look forward to and it lifts you for the rest of the week and I don’t think I have lost any weight, but I feel fitter, I am a bit bendier but not straight after the match! But during the week I feel I can get a lot more done; it’s definitely helping me.”* Participant

*"I've noticed my walking has improved, I can walk faster, for longer, I can't keep up with my husband but I'm not as far behind as I was. I can do longer distances. I look at my Fitbit numbers and I've noticed an improvement."*

Participant

*"I used to lead a very sedentary lifestyle. I've had knee ops in the past so that meant I am not allowed to run. My blood pressure was right up, I didn't do any sport and then I joined the Wycombe Wanderers fitness programme, and they suggested I try different things and off the back of that I started walking football."*

Participant

**Mental wellbeing** – There were several comments made about more positive feelings of general wellbeing as a result of playing walking football. These included participants' feeling good about themselves. There was a knock-on effect of the other outcomes including improving physical health, making friends, and reducing loneliness, as well as improving skills, people feeling happier, improving mood, and providing generally a more positive outlook on life.

*"It clears your head, after it you feel a million times better for it. Feel so much better for it."*

8  
Participant

*"It has affected me in every way, improvement in my activity levels, weight, mental wellbeing, joined other groups. My family are laughing all the time because they keep saying that I think I am Jack Grealish, even family has noticed the difference in me and I look forward to it every week, it has just lifted my whole wellbeing up (not that it was particularly bad) but after you retire you get into a bit of a hole, and it has just lifted me in terms of my mood to another level."*

Participant

*"It helps tackle loneliness and mental health. It is gentle exercise, but it has a massive impact on mental health as well ... it is great for mindfulness."*

Participant

*"I lost my Mum suddenly last year and I spiralled into a dark place. My partner saw the advert on Facebook and suggested I attend for my own mental health. Starting this group was the first thing that got me out of the house and continues to push me every week to get out no matter how I feel as I always feel 100 times better after the session. It took a lot for me to step out and attend that first session ... it has given me the confidence to go on and join a second walking football group."*

Participant

*"Social interaction and confidence building is first and foremost, even if people have come to get a bit fitter, when you talk to them and they tell their story you can see that the reason they come back each is because they feel more confident, they want to talk to the people that come. A perfect example of that, when we spoke to the long-term health group, one person is playing with us, all along did not at any point mention the change in his physical ability, but when he first started, he would stand, and sway and we were really concerned he might fall. He could not speak, he had a stammer, and you would not know that today. He talked about how his confidence was better, and how his depression had lifted, he did not talk at all about the physical improvements, it was all about the camaraderie, friendship, and the impact of mental health. That group said I didn't want to be competitive; people say that it is about being social and being outside."*

Project lead

Having some time out from other challenges experienced in life was also very important for some participants.

*"I work at home and have all day on my own, it's something to really look forward to, I have a mad hour and don't think about anything else, no work, no family, I just enjoy it."*

Participant

*"There are the mental benefits. Feeling happy, feeling invigorated. Just that social aspect of it is so important, isn't it? Like you said, 'you time' having time out for yourself if you are constantly looking after grandkids, for example and it's some real time for you, isn't it?"*

Participant

The impact on mental health conditions was also referred to by some participants and how walking football has helped them to cope better.

*"I have some hidden disabilities, and it definitely helps me. I notice playing football is very helpful for me in just making me feel better, it's the social networking, feeling better about yourself, and the fresh air, all of that combined helps your mental wellbeing, it's very important."*

Participant

*"Been massive for my mental health, it has been massive for me as I have been off work, and it gives me something to focus on and it has boosted that. Because of how the sessions are designed it makes you feel confident and makes you feel good when you leave the session."*

Participant

**Individual development** –In terms of individual development outcomes included improving confidence and self-esteem, as well as improving individual football skills and ability.

*"I would have never had the confidence to go down to [the football club] without having started here. This has done that for me, and it is a place you can go, I would encourage anybody regardless of how good or bad they think they are to get themselves here to give them that confidence."*

Participant

*"Good fun, and the coaches pass things onto us to help us. I still don't know what I am doing but the coaches tell me I am doing alright! There is never any criticism, we are all in the same position."*

Participant

*"The sessions have really had an impact on participants' wellbeing and confidence. People make friendships, people come for the company."*

Participant

*"I was a bit worried because I am absolutely terrible at football, I was worried that I would ruin everybody's night and I would be rubbish. This is what put me off in the past from doing these sorts of things. So, my first Monday night, I was a little bit tentative, but actually to be honest with you it does not seem to matter that I am rubbish because everyone is very supportive, and nobody seems to care about that. It's more about having a laugh, a good time and doing something that is good for you."*

Participant

**Social and community development** The social outcomes from walking football were particularly strong across all focus groups. People felt a sense of belonging and had made new friends, they felt less isolated, and they enjoyed the camaraderie of being part of a team, it was something which had become a key part of their weekly routines.

*"I think having this whole sort of walking football framework to kind of come into and join is a great way to perpetuate playing football in any sense. But the fitness benefits, I think, and the chance to play team sport with a lot of other people. Because all you ever hear about on the news or anything that you hear about is always about youngsters – getting youngsters involved. But I am like 'what about me'. It is one of the few opportunities where you can come and play a team sport with people with more different backgrounds and a very different group of people, and you just kind of come together and just have this great fun."*

Participant



*"I feel fitter and healthier. Sometimes I leave there, and I am aching from laughing, not from the walking football, but because we have such a laugh. So, for me it is more the social side of it. I love it. It's outshone everything I expected it to be."* Participant

*"Before I would not come out of my house and my carers could not get me out but now, I come to this and the walking group too. I come even if I am not feeling well."* Participant

Some of the walking football sessions also included social time before or after sessions which was important to participants and provided an opportunity to get to know their new walking football friends a little bit more and that chance to sit down and talk was invaluable to some.

*"There have been times after we have played when we've actually sat and drunk tea for longer than we play football."* Participant

*"It has been a big thing for me to come along on my own. It is a sociable group and I love the get together and cup of tea at the end. It's not just about the exercise for me, it's the chance to be sociable afterwards, we are all friends now, it's great."* Participant

*"It has given me the confidence to attend other groups, I am going to another social group now, I would never have done that before."* Participant

*"There's that real sense of togetherness which has built over the course of the sessions ...considering we were all kind of strangers before the group started, it's led to friendships as well and I have started to play bowls with another participant."* Participant

In addition, some areas had created social networks, for example, WhatsApp groups, in which they communicated with the other participants outside of the sessions. These groups were used for both chat about the sessions (for example, 'who is coming?', 'does anyone need a lift?') as well as reaching out to people who may not have attended sessions for a couple of weeks, providing some encouragement to return as well as checking if they needed any help or support. The groups would also include other off-topic conversations and support for other participants too.

*"There are quite a few of us on a WhatsApp group so we keep in touch that way, and reach out if someone is missing, if you have not seen someone for a few weeks you might drop them a message on the group to check they are ok. It is so supportive."* Participant

### 7.3.3 Other (unintended) outcomes/benefits

Some further outcomes of the sessions were highlighted in some of the focus groups:

**Authentic football experiences** – In Age UK Buckinghamshire, the ladies' sessions normally take place using the 3G pitches at Buckinghamshire College. However, one week earlier in the year, they had their session on the pitch at Adams Park - Wycombe Wanderers FC. They played some mini (fun) matches with other walking football teams. All participants were very positive about this as an authentic experience, playing on the pitch of the club they had supported since being children, where they had watched professional teams play. During the session they were filmed running out of the tunnel to the theme tune from 'Match of the Day'. The ladies had very proudly shared the video with family and friends. Whilst they mostly do not want to play competitively regularly, this was described as a great experience and a lasting memory. In North Yorkshire, sessions are hosted at the Scarborough Athletic Stadium.

*"Imagine that...ME! The only member of my family, all these generations of football fans, to ever have played on the pitch at Adams Park."* Participant



**Developing coaching and volunteering opportunities for players** – in some areas, there is potential for coaching or volunteering opportunities for participants to aid their progression, and players have been identified that have the potential to help with coaching.

*“We have linked into other programmes, one is ‘stepping over the side-line’ programme and we have participants going there, to see the other side of the game, getting more knowledge of the coaching side, not necessarily wanting to coach, but to develop their knowledge of the whole game and feel part of the female game in general.”*

Participant

There were also other volunteering opportunities developed through the networking taking place at walking football.

*“We have participants who have become involved in volunteering for [their local] Age UK, done organised fundraising, started volunteering in the Age UK shops and joined the volunteer list for the befriending scheme, all of which started from coming here to the football session.”*

Project lead

**Positive feelings about ageing** – it was also mentioned that walking football helped with general feelings of wellbeing as people got older as well as being inspiring and instilling a sense of pride.

*“You don't feel as ancient when you do things like this. You just drift into things as you get older, but you do something like this, and you're uplifted.”*

Participant

*“A lot of people my age, I'm late 60s, a lot of people have got disabilities, and they think it's bizarre for someone my age to be able to play. So, although they might be positive about the opportunity being there and the fact that I play, they would consider it quite strange for someone my age to be able to play.”*

Participant

*“This afternoon my wife is going into Newcastle so I will pop across to the pub and they say, ‘you're playing football at your age?’ but it does not matter how old you are, some of these other lads are ‘kids’ compared to me.”*

Participant

*“My Grandchildren keep saying to me, you know it's so encouraging...It's very inspiring and then my son, when he comes and sees me, he said ‘I can't believe you are a footballer’”*

Participant

*“I think everyone should just try it. If I mention it to anyone, the immediate reaction is this stereotype, it is all very sedate. I think everyone should give it a go at least once and then make their own judgement. It just seems that people do not really know what it is. From the outside there is that bit of a stigma, but in actual fact, for me, I have absolutely loved it and it's been one of the best things I've ever done. So go along, try it, it might be just the thing you need.”*

Participant

### 7.3.4 Main challenges / barriers

#### *Challenges and barriers to session provision*

The challenges in session provision can be split into two main categories: (1) issues with the **supply** of sessions and (2) challenges in generating and meeting the **demand** for those sessions.

#### *The supply of sessions*

One of the primary hurdles faced by project leads has been securing appropriate facilities. Finding a venue proved to be a significant challenge for some groups, delaying the start of sessions for those unable to secure a suitable location until June. Another obstacle arose from pre-existing

bookings, particularly during school holiday camps, leading to weeks of sessions being cancelled due to venue unavailability. This inconsistency posed difficulties, especially during the initial stages when new members were joining. Additionally, ensuring the suitability of the environment for the client base has been challenging in certain areas. For instance, in North Yorkshire, three-quarters of the pitch being utilised by young males created a more aggressive and noisier atmosphere, impacting the sessions negatively.

*“Some facilities/venues have other priority bookings e.g., school holiday clubs which can disrupt the weekly sessions.”*

Project lead

*“The structure of the facility has been a major issue. Full size pitch is partitioned into 4 quarters and the other 3 were being used by a local 5v5 league. All male players, younger who did not understand or like that a group of female players were there at the same time. The young males have shown a lot of things that are bad about men in football. One player entered the pitch and when asked to leave became aggressive towards the coach and another male player had to make them leave. This had a very adverse effect on the group. Our director is taking this issue further.”*

Project lead

*“The turnaround between receiving the funding and needing to set up the sessions was short, and we were conscious that we needed to set up and deliver by the end of October, we were in a rush to get going. If we had had more time, we could have done more work in the community to build relationships with communities, community groups, GPs, and so on, and more promotion in the area, and some consultation with the target audience as to venue, timings etc.”*

Project lead

*“It has been difficult to secure a venue for their second group. The Project Lead has been left really frustrated, as they have the demand, they have Chelsea FC Foundation, they have the volunteers, but did not have the venue despite a lot of effort trying to secure one. They secured a second venue, (but the second session started delivery later than planned).”*

Project lead

### ***The demand for sessions***

Among the cited issues were time constraints due to session scheduling around work or caregiving commitments. Managing injuries and health conditions, ranging from serious medical issues to minor concerns like hay fever during outdoor sessions, presented challenges. Low attendance numbers and the struggle to attract a balanced gender mix in mixed sessions were also discussed as issues in the early stages, and less so once sessions had been established.

Project leads highlighted the diverse range of abilities, physical literacy levels, and football experience among participants. Balancing these differences took time to ensure that session content effectively catered to the needs of all participants.

*“There can be a wide variety of football ability, and physical ability which can cause issues, e.g., one player is 75 and was really unsteady on his feet when he started, yet the group is quite a quick pace (for walking football) and he struggled to keep up, although his balance has improved.”*

Project lead

*“Although it has worked well for one group, it has not really worked well for the general population group. We have had people come along and ask if they can do it and unfortunately, we have had to turn them away because this group has quite complex needs and you have to hit a certain criterion to be able to join the group. We don't want to isolate people out of it, but we have to think of the people who are already within it.”*

Project lead

In three regions, project leads noted an oversaturation of walking football on offer locally. Consequently, they have shifted focus to target alternative organisations that could guide individuals toward these specialized sessions. Additionally, recruitment challenges have surfaced in specific areas. For instance, attempts to recruit for mixed sessions led to attracting only one gender. Furthermore, time slots clashed with those still working, affecting participation. There were also difficulties faced in efforts to recruit players from the Muslim community during Ramadan.

*“Tried to set up a mixed group but ended up being male only and struggled to attract females. Not a major issue as a lot of groups offered locally by Age UK are female dominate/orientated and the participants prefer an all-male group.”*

Project lead

*“We created a men’s long-term health conditions group, and it was scheduled at 4-5pm and the time slot did not work, slow to start and was getting 5 at most, and some of those participants moved on to different sessions run by Scarborough Athletic FC.”*

Project lead

*“We have a high population of Muslims in our local area, and we chose a location which is in the community, in the middle of a housing estate and quite visible but we struggled to recruit. When we initially set up it was at the start of Ramadan, and in hindsight the timing was not great and we wanted to be sensitive to Ramadan, and because of this we delayed our promotion. We launched the session, and had a few people come but they were all existing participants that attended another Age UK walking football session (from an earlier cohort) – so they were existing participants and not the target audience from the local area. The challenge is attracting new participants from the target group.”*

Project lead

*“One issue is the saturation of the market in Stockport. Where one door shuts another one opens, that is where I feel like not getting bogged down in the basics and look to try and move on and try something different. When it comes to learning process and evaluating. It is good to learn and valuable for the future – looking at where we have gone wrong and how we turn it around.”*

Project lead

There is also the regularity of attendance and fluctuating numbers which affect the session, and the quality of it.

*“We know it's not the same people every week, it's not competitive sports with people turning up there every week and training to become fitter, they are going to be social, have fun, talk to each other so you need time to develop a core 10 to 12 people, with probably about 20 people involved at a time to make it worthwhile to run, and you need that year to develop that.”*

Project lead

### ***Challenges and barriers to participation***

Some participants outlined that they had overcome significant challenges or obstacles to join in. However, discussions highlighted specific issues they encountered, or considerations in deciding whether to continue playing. Among these considerations was the preference for indoor versus outdoor play, previously discussed concerning venue choices. Some individuals with strong preferences leaned toward attending sessions based on this factor alone.

Comments also arose from participants regarding playing in unfavourable weather conditions. While some found this discouraging, others embraced it as an integral part of the game.

*"Had it been outdoors, at my age it would have reduced my attendance in all honesty. Even today when it is at the other end of the scale, 25 degrees and really hot, being inside is good, much better off playing indoors."*

Participant

*"We have played in snow, hail, rain, and everything has been thrown at us and we have continued to play. Had it been grass I think some of us would have struggled and needed more equipment and clothing and not enjoyed getting muddy etc."*

Participant

*"The weather could have been a barrier, but we have persevered, one week the pitch was covered in snow, and I sent a picture to my grandson who plays in an academy, and he thought it was marvellous and he said they wouldn't have been out playing in that!"*

Participant

There was a comment from a delivery lead regarding participants with a disability, with some participants with a disability finding it difficult to attend and engage on a weekly basis. It is very much dependent on how they are feeling each week. It was suggested that this could have implications for sustaining the sessions/charging individuals consistently. In a similar vein, it was reported by one participant that they struggled with their hearing in noisy environments [like a sports hall], however it did not appear to be a deciding factor in engagement, with another participant stating their hearing aids can be easily adjusted so they can hear better during the sessions.

*"You don't know from one day to the next whether someone is going to be well enough to attend, it is difficult to charge them if this is the case."*

Project lead

*"Hearing can be a problem for me, I wear hearing aids, but I just turn them up a bit!"*

Participant

A couple of participants commented that they had been put off from trying walking football originally as they thought it would be a very slow format of the game.

*"I didn't want to go at first, I thought 'walking football, that sounds boring' but it's really good."*

Participant

*"I put off joining last year. I did see that it was walking football and I thought, 'oh, that sounds so slow'. So, you know, kind of stand there and just pass the ball and have to stand there and pass it again. And it was when I did eventually find it, I realised you can walk very fast if you want to, and you can tackle. I thought it was just passing from one to another standing there, you know, walking towards the ball if it was free. So, I was sort of put off by the name."*

Participant

Some participants described that they had needed to adjust to learn how to play walking football, particularly if they had been used to different formats of the game.

*"I find it very difficult, when I was younger, I had two offers to sign for Newcastle, but my job was to hit the opposition to take the playmaker and the runners out and I was local sprint champion over 100m, but here you cannot hit these or run! I find it a totally different game and it taken time to adjust. A lot of it is close contact and little dribblers, well I would have kicked them off the pitch, but you are not allowed to do that so found it difficult to adjust!"*

Participant

Learning to play for those that have not played before, it was also important to have people within the team that were able to lead the others during a game.

*"I think one of the things with women of our generation when we play sport is that we are too quiet. I don't say a lot but generally you do need someone that knows what they are doing, and is able to speak up like that, because it makes the teamwork."*

Participant

Getting injured was perceived as a potential barrier for some participants.

*"It could put someone off, if it was their first session, one lady came, and it happened to her on her first week and she got hit by a stray ball that hit her that hard she injured her leg and is worried about coming back."* Project lead

*"One lady said it was too much for her and also the fact the ball hit her shins and she's got an injury. Only bruises, but it was too much to do then try and work and cope. I think sometimes people have felt the risk; although it's non-contact the ball can still hit you."* Project lead

*"You can get injured sometimes and it just takes forever to recover. Recovery rate is so slow at our age. I was pulling muscles for the first four weeks and then it started to gradually ease off and I can walk a bit faster, and I am not having to boost myself up with ibuprofen each week, so it is doing me some good. I can get straight out now and I am fine, even with the bad knee. It's definitely beneficial."* Participant

One area commented that others using the pitches were not always considerate or welcoming which was off putting, which resulted in changing the session day and time to resolve the issue.

*"There is some encroachment on the pitch from the league that plays after us, a lot of shouting and people being hit by the ball. It has not affected most, but there have been instances where they come early and start moving the goals and gave me grief and when the male staff comes down, they are very pally. They are very rude, and it could put some off as it throws you off a bit. They are tapping watches before the time we are due to finish and the atmosphere they create is not very welcoming. I have had to tell some of the lads off for bad language."* Participant

There were examples of intergenerational considerations which may be both barriers and enablers/motivators. Some participants outlined that looking after grandchildren was something which takes up a lot of free time, whilst others had started playing with their grandchildren in the park or garden and it has been a point of conversation with their families.

*"We have not got a lot of participants that have dropped out, we have a lot on the register signed up, but I know a lot of them are just busy. Grandchildren have holidays booked which affects attendance."* Project lead

It is also important to understand local need, and that it can be diverse in a small area based on income, access to transport or transport links, and the cost of getting to the session, and the session itself.

*"We are in a central position, but we have people that wouldn't come from some parts of the area to join this group because there's no bus routes and they want something more local to them. You must recognise that the level of income has an impact on how people can participate, not just about paying subs, but transport, it has an impact."* Project lead

Finally, one barrier not cited about the Age UK cohort 3 offer but cited about previous experience of walking football was the application of inclusion/exclusion criteria for participation, based on age, which can be a barrier for those people in and around the target market. One participant noted from a prior experience:

*"There was one locally and you had to be 50 to join so I had to wait a while until I was 50, but literally the week after my 50<sup>th</sup> birthday I went along, loved it, and I now do different ones on different days, and I love it. It's good crack, good for fitness. I'd not played football for the last 25 years of my life due to my knee injury, so it was great to get back to doing football and I love it, absolutely love it."* Participant



### 7.3.5 Key Learning

- There were varied motivations for taking part in walking football and included being football fans, wanting to improve fitness level and overall health and wellbeing as well as being part of a rehabilitation programme from illness or surgery. The opportunity to socialise and being a regular programmed activity in a participants week was also a key motivating factor.
- In terms of benefits or outcomes of being involved in walking football, several benefits were cited but included improvements in fitness levels, losing weight and improvements in overall energy levels.
- The programme had significant impacts on participants' mental wellbeing, providing opportunities to make new friends, reduce loneliness and improving confidence levels, as well as providing an opportunity to have some time out and away from other challenges in life which are faced by many participants. As a result of these impacts participants reported feeling a lift in their mood and having a more positive outlook on life.
- One of the primary hurdles faced by project leads was securing appropriate facilities. Another obstacle arose from pre-existing bookings, leading to weeks of sessions being cancelled due to venue unavailability. Time constraints due to session scheduling around work or caregiving commitments, and managing injuries and health conditions also presented challenges, whilst low attendance numbers and the struggle to attract a balanced gender mix in mixed sessions were also discussed.
- Project leads highlighted the diverse range of abilities, physical literacy levels, and football experience among participants. Balancing these differences took time to ensure that session content effectively catered to the needs of all participants. Additionally, in certain regions project leads noted an oversaturation of walking football on offer locally.
- As existing participants, most had overcome significant challenges or obstacles to join in. However, discussions highlighted specific issues they encountered, including the preference for indoor versus outdoor play. Comments also arose regarding playing in unfavourable weather conditions. While some found this discouraging, others embraced it as an integral part of the game.

## 7.4. Other headline findings

### 7.4.1 Sustainability planning

#### *Pursuing a funding model to sustain the programme*

Sustainability planning has primarily focused on two core elements: the funding model and the cultivation of the workforce and volunteers. Certain instances within the program exemplify a forward-thinking approach, where sustainability was integrated from its inception. This approach is beneficial for creating a structure which can self-sustain beyond the Cohort 3 funding. Regarding finances, there are discernible differences among the groups. Some groups charged a fee on participants for attendance from week 2 (first week free), while others did not charge at any point of the programme.

*"We have not charged at all; it has been free. From October it will run like any other exercise group that we run; we will have to charge clients for it. I will try and get that as low possible: I know our bid writing team is looking for more funding, however if not it will just be run like a normal exercise group you will have to pay £3-4 depending on the numbers."* Project lead



*“Sessions are free now and will be a charge of £3-4 once the funding finishes and most indicate they would be happy to pay. The venue is the main expense and the one used is higher than we could get elsewhere so it may move venues, but also may go to bi-weekly to double the sessions offered and increase the revenue.”*

Project lead

*“Sustainability was set-up at the outset, we started with the end in mind so made sure it had a focus on the end point of the funding so there is a service provision at the end, but we need more thought about how they do it and how we manage it. We keep all the subs in a pot and are working with SAFC to get funding to get the volunteers qualified and cover their costs. Both groups pay a small sub each week, and we did this from previous experience of other groups – if it is free for more than a taster, when you start to charge potential to reduce chances of having to re-start. Amount was agreed with Scarborough Athletic FC to see how much they would need to cover costs for the venue hire (£30).”*

Project lead

*“We have used a small charge for sessions, meaning we have a pot of money to be able to sustain the sessions after October. We find that having a cost for sessions means people will commit to it. If it is free, they might register but, on the day, change their mind, if they have paid there is a commitment there. We charge £4 per session, they have the option to pay each week when they arrive, or they can pay £40 for a 10-week block, then they have the commitment to attend. This will enable us to continue. The numbers attending now suggest that, if it continues to grow (we get someone new most weeks) we will need to employ another coach – the session will need two coaches rather than one.”*

Project lead

There was some discussion around sustainability of the sessions in terms of adding a cost to help fund future sessions. Overall, participants did not mind paying a small cost for sessions and in general they had expected to pay.

*“Obviously, you would prefer it to be free, but I would not object if I had to pay some money for it, but I thought you would have to pay when I joined so it is a bonus to be free. It is wonderful. Although if it were £10, I’m sure my spouse would definitely complain!”*

Participant

*“First session is free but then £3 after and it is fine, we enjoy it, and it is worth the money. Could be a barrier for some but everyone here understands that.”*

Participant

#### **7.4.2 Cultivating a ‘workforce of volunteers’**

The secondary aspect of sustainability has emphasised training individuals to become volunteers or certified coaches, ensuring the presence of capable leaders or groups once the funding ceases. Noteworthy instances showcase participants stepping into roles or volunteers striving to attain qualifications to lead sessions.

*“We have two females that are volunteers training to be coaches which will make the group self-sustaining in the longer-term.”*

Project lead

*“We are looking at upskilling a couple more of the participants who are actually taking part in the walking football. That means that if the coach is off then someone else can cover. That gives that group a really positive incentive going forward for sustaining it.”*

Project lead

There are some additional considerations for sustainability regarding the workforce element, around quality assurance for the participants beyond the funding (facility, qualifications of lead person, the management of the sessions, the training for leads, Health & Safety requirements, looking after the finances, access to first aid and other medical considerations such as defibrillator etc.). It is important for local Age UKs to consider these additional aspects of sustainability and

not just focus on having a funding pot and a lead person – sustainability should not be jeopardised by ‘red tape’, but there needs to be consideration of these aspects to quality assure and support the programme. This may be accessed through partner organisations or the creation of pathways e.g., social prescribing and GP referrals, to ensure there is still some link to the local network of service providers.

### 7.4.3 Transition pathways to further football engagement

Regarding future pathways and aspirations, there was a diverse range of outlooks on the topic. While all participants expressed a desire to enhance their football skills and playing ability, not all participants are aiming to pursue competitive play. While some expressed an interest in joining a league and participating in matches, others preferred to maintain their involvement in the current sessions, engaging in informal play within their group.

*“I don’t want to do it competitively. I want to improve my skills because I’m not very good, and I want to be able to, when the ball comes to me, not panic, because I’m a panicker, and just be able to kick it in the direction I want it to go. I want to improve what I’m doing within our safety net.”*

Participant

*“I think it would be nice to have something to aim for, but I don’t think that has to be playing against other teams every week.”*

Participant

*“I came and I found that I can do this and I’m not too bad at it, and before I knew I was playing 3 times a week, I play at the foundation on a Tuesday. After joining here and enjoying it, I was confident and knew I could do it and next thing I know I’m playing in a league at the Trust on a Thursday. I have gone from zero to ten all because of this session, it’s been a really big catalyst.”*

Participant

### 7.4.4 A greater focus on facilitating the social aspect

Setting-up walking football sessions has been the main priority for project leads, with a view to facilitating more social connections through playing. There are many instances where projects have looked to develop or facilitate additional activities for their participants, including incorporating a social element to the groups/a chance to sit down and have a catch up afterwards. For many participants, this aspect was equally if not more important than the activity, and consideration to this should be made when selecting venues and times etc.

*“It has been a big thing for me to come along on my own. It is a sociable group and I love the get together and cup of tea at the end. It’s not just about the exercise for me, it’s the chance to be sociable afterwards, we are all friends now, it’s great.”*

Participant

*“The sessions have really had an impact on participants’ wellbeing and confidence. People make friendships, people come for the company.”*

Project lead

*“A bit of everything, a lot of the men just come for the social aspect of things in it’s just something they like and from the social aspect of things it battles loneliness, men’s mental health. It is gentle exercise, but it has had a massive impact on a few of the men’s health.”*

Project lead

### 7.4.5 The perception of the Age UK brand

Some of the project leads outlined that the walking football project had opened their local Age UK up to people who would not traditionally use their services, and that people had accessed their offer for the first time.

*“From the charity perspective these things to me are positive because they change the perception of our brand. When I came in a few-years ago it was things like coffee mornings things for very old people, principally old women as well just a very small subset of what is 50 + and all types of people. We have done a menopause group for people; we have got the LGBT group we set up. It is all part of the idea you can age well, not come to Age UK when you are fit to drop. That's the business plan and all about ageing well, living well and that understanding that we are not retirement-plus we are 50+.We have a lot of random projects in different projects e.g. independent living, and we need a mass of evidence from falls prevention all the way to people participating in sport and what do we do to help as Age UK to help people live better lives to actually have quality of life around how to get financial assistance and access different services and different groups.”*

Project lead

Some leads also discussed having a slightly different physical activity offer was also a good addition to the local provision, and less around some stereotyping of the brand which may occur.

*“We have done projects with other organisations and even the Age UK Walking programme, which are all aimed at much more ‘immobile’ people who maybe are not leaving the house. The Walking project is for 75+ and people doing less than 30 minutes activity per week to join a walking group. It started off as walking program for over 65 and we promoted it a lot and loads came forward and they were deemed to be healthy, but we cannot turn people away because they are too active and there is a lot of demand for that. There is a demand for things, if you put them on people will come, it is a difficult thing to charge for things like walking. All of the walking activities are really good for 50+ because what you do is you take away sport and people feel that they are able to participate that's the difference. There is a reduced risk of injury as well.”*

Project lead

*“It is about the perception of people about what is involved, but (projects like walking football) helps to change the perception of what our brand is about.”*

Project lead

#### **7.4.6 Support from Age UK project team**

The consensus from the project leads was that the support from the central Age UK Walking Football Programme project team has been excellent, supportive and they have facilitated opportunities to network with other project leads which has enabled discussions between them which have been valuable.

*“Talking to the other project leads has been invaluable and really reassuring – seeing the challenges others faced and having 1-2-1s with them was very useful. The Age UK central team have been very useful, I have never had so much support on a project in many years of doing this, lots of help and reassurances - realistic expectations were set and a lot of important information and guidance was given at the start. No criticism when things have been slow or not worked as planned which has been great.”*

Project lead

*“They have been fantastic; and very patient with me – particularly with the session that hadn't been working. But they have given me the confidence to learn from setbacks. It has been good to hear about others in similar situations and that it is not just me who is struggling. They have given me plenty of advice on how to move forward.”*

Project lead

### 7.4.7 Expenditure budget

Project leads discussed how they used their expenditure budget on the project, specifically around the restrictions on how you could spend money to support the groups. As the funding for the project was from the Lottery, there are restrictions on the expenditure items that are allowed, although some of those restrictions linked to barriers to participation e.g. personal equipment.

*“Things like doing a celebration event, or giving trophies or medals, we weren’t allowed to do that, which I find it unusual because it is part of football culture to have those events and awards, it is part of that camaraderie. Things like we could buy equipment, but you cannot buy football boots, what if we have players that did not have boots and could not play? There were restrictions that we did not seem to understand in an area of poverty and deprivation, small things that people might need that make a difference.*

Project lead

### 7.4.8 Emerging links with contribution to social value

For many organisations, there is a strive to understand and quantify the social value of their programmes using calculation tools such as Return on Investment (ROI) or other social value calculation models. Much of the evidence collated in this report is qualitative around the themes and area where participants have benefitted from participating in walking football. This approach captures and explains areas of the ROI in non-financial terms, i.e., how increasing physical activity levels can lead to an improvement in participants’ fitness, strength, mobility, or their overall wellbeing (both physical and mental). This, in turn, may mean someone can be mobile or access social groups for longer, thereby meaning they can maintain their independence and rely less on social care/ NHS services. The methods employed for this evaluation are not able to calculate or estimate how much such activities save the NHS, however the feedback from participants does demonstrate the impact the programme has had and may be an avenue to explore in the future regarding the quantification of a programme in financial terms, as well as non-financial.

## 8. SUMMARY

The evaluation of Cohort 3 of the Age UK Walking Football Programme has demonstrated a wide range of positive impacts on participants, discovered through two rounds of consultation with project leads and participants. The creation and development of 13 new walking football sessions has resulted in 254 participants registered and over 2,500 attendances. The evaluation has uncovered that the main benefits cited were that walking football was fun, it improved people’s confidence, created better social connections, and a had a positive impact on wellbeing, both physical and mental. The programme has also uncovered how some participants have increased their social network, resulting in a reduction in feelings of isolation and loneliness, and there are examples of how joining walking football has been a conduit into other activities and networks. Participants told us that the Covid-19 pandemic had been a major disruption, stopping many of their previous activities. For many, it has been hard to get back to regular activities following a period of time where many older people had to shield / stay at home and saw their social connections with friends and family affected.

The Age UK Walking Football Programme has been a great opportunity for people to get back to being active and social. It is evident that some groups aimed to work with participants with more complex issues than others, or targeted harder to reach groups, therefore the level and pace of the progress differed.

There is not an ‘off the shelf’ manual for setting up new walking football sessions, but there are areas of commonalities, including having a secure and suitable venue, recruiting a core group of

participants early who are advocates of the programme, having a plan for sustainability built in from the start (ideally via a partner with the means to continue delivery) and making use of a variety of promotional avenues and referral/signposting options. Literature shows that catering for local demand is also an important factor, and with each area being different, the session project leads set-up all had variations between them, but which suited the local demand they were catering for.

### **Main Successes**

The evaluation has captured a wide range of benefits from cohort 3 of the walking football programme, including (for participants) improvements in physical wellbeing, activity levels, weight loss, mental wellbeing, social connections/reduced loneliness, new opportunities, friendships, and people having fun. From the supply side, some new partnerships have developed, and some have strengthened, and there have been examples of participants becoming volunteers elsewhere in the Age UK network which has boosted their local workforce. Physical and mental wellbeing was consistently cited as an area of improvement.

*“One male in the LTHC group was struggling with his speech and had poor balance but played football when he was younger. When he got onto the pitch he was back to his old self, funny, making jokes, and he has really improved his balance and strength, and coordination.”*

Project lead

*“Effectively used as a fall prevention programme for one woman. Quite a few with depression that are benefitting from the mental and social stimulation the programme offers.”*

Project lead

*“There have definitely been examples of health improvement. One participant mentioned to me since she started the walking football group, she has lost over a stone, which is fantastic, and then there has been personal friendships made as well. Two of the ladies that attend the sessions have actually exchanged telephone numbers, and they meet up in their own personal time.”*

Project lead

Personal development was also cited frequently throughout the different projects and the two consultation points including improved confidence, social interactions and having something to leave the house for to do an activity you look forward to.

*“There are many different benefits seen from the participants, for some it is improved balance and physical ‘presence’, for some it is the social aspect, not being stuck in the house, and some have joined other Age UK [Gateshead] groups / become volunteers having made friends.”*

Project lead

*“Some participants have signed-up as volunteers or fundraisers more generally. This project has been a great starter as a pathway into other things.”*

Project lead

*“A lot of players are new to football, zero experience, and the coach has been great to help develop confidence and skills of the group. Participants have told me they have seen a positive impact on their physicality, confidence, body positivity and we have received a lot of positive feedback.”*

Project lead

*“It has led to lots of opportunities to engage in further activities aside from walking football, particularly with Age UK [Kensington & Chelsea] and the wide range of activities they offer on a weekly basis.”*

Project lead



*“One of the ladies that originally came used to play football. She is 67 now but she had to give up as she broke her ankle. She has been absolutely brilliant. I am trying to get her to volunteer to take over the sessions. She has been good at encouraging the ladies to do warmups, she has been really supportive to other ladies. She has helped to improvise on the sessions which has been really good because it is hard to play a full game with low numbers. We have improvised and she has really helped this. She has also brought her friend along who also used to play football with her. They have been really encouraging. Some people have never played football before or kicked a ball before. It is not just the exercise; it is the social aspect.”*

Project lead

The social aspects of participating have been noticed by project leads from the feedback they have received, and this is both in-session and out-of-session. Within the sessions, leads have reported the supportive and non-judgemental environment which has developed, and a sense of belonging. Outside of the sessions, communication channels have developed including group chats, people exchanging numbers, sharing lifts to the sessions and new friendships.

*“Female sessions: It is really positive. They really enjoy the sessions and they have formed a close group. The social side is really important. They all care about each other. This is what will keep it sustainable – they have formed a close group. There is a WhatsApp group in which they all communicate, particularly on the day of the session – ‘does anyone need a lift’, ‘looking forward to seeing you all’, ‘thanks for a fun evening’ etc. The conversation is ongoing particularly on the day of the session. It is really positive.”*

Project lead

*“Physical, mental, and social improvements. Social in particular – a strong bond has formed, and they wear Chelsea FC t-shirts and feel proud to be part of the project – they see themselves as the Chelsea FC Women’s walking football team!”*

Project lead

*“Social Aspect – e.g., the lady who comes and makes the coffee – she is still involved even though she is not playing. There is a little support network going on there. It is non-judgemental. Everyone has got their own little problems, but no one moans about it, they do not put their burdens on anyone else. They are all there dealing with similar situations and dealing with similar things. It is really refreshing to see. They are talking about expanding further, it is going to have a legacy in Stockport.”*

Project lead

There are also examples of the importance of the walking football sessions to the partners or the participants.

*“His wife is his carer, and she gets an hour “off”, and he has since joined other Age UK [North Yorkshire Coast & Moors] groups. He says he feels like he was when he was younger, and really enjoys the banter.”*

Project lead

Developing new partnerships/links with local organisations was cited by project leads, although depth and involvement certainly varied. Where it has worked well, this has a beneficial impact on the programme and the ability to refer people into and out of walking football. Project leads have identified that participants find the sessions fun, something to look forward to, a highlight of their week and something that is a positive influence in their life.

*“When you visit, there is a lot of laughing and camaraderie, they look like they enjoy the social aspects, reduced isolation/loneliness and there are physical literacy benefits too.”*

Project lead



This also includes coaches as well as participants.

*"I do a lot in the week, and this is my favourite slot of the week, the banter is great, lots of smiles, lots of laughing, and they are relaxed because it is fun."*

Coach

Following the interim report, Age UK were interested to understand whether there are any examples of new clients being directed to other services and ultimately receiving advice around additional benefits or access to support. There were some isolated examples of that, but it was not widely cited, with some project leads suggesting that, because a larger proportion of participants were younger than the participants in a lot of the other projects they run, the level of support required, and demand was different. For this type of signposting and linkage to happen it either has to happen organically, which is quite difficult and outside of a local Age UK's control or has to be driven by the partners promoting such services and advice directly to walking football participants. If it is not driven by project leads, it becomes difficult to attribute any changes in this area to the programme. For Age UK projects to achieve this, and be attributable to the funded project, this needs to be part of the process and guidance so that those avenues and opportunities are front and centre. There were some examples of this taking place.

*"Having a chat with people, they have told me things and I have been able to support them through other areas of our work at Age UK Trafford. For example, one lady asked for a quick chat and asked for some information to help her Mum and asked if there was anyone at Age UK Trafford who could help her."*

Project lead

## 8.1 Summary of the three research questions

The following section summarises the findings from the three main research questions.

### **1. What approaches have local Age UKs used to identify and engage older people with walking football, and how successful or not have they been?**

There have been a variety of methods used and there is not an 'off the shelf' manual for identifying and engaging older people, as it depended on the local networks and relationships already in place as Cohort 3 began. There is a wide mix of factors to consider on the demand side, in terms of preferences around the constitution of the sessions (e.g., time, indoor versus outdoor, game-based session versus skills), and a range of different physical ability levels, football experience and motivations for attending, which makes it difficult to paint a picture of a standard approach.

Each group needs to be created based on the local demand, and this illustrates the points made in the literature review around listening to participant wants and needs. Some of the underspend by projects led to some social media promotional boosts, and this resulted in some new participants in some areas, but also very little impact in others, and Facebook is the most popular and most successful platform used to promote the sessions. The importance of local knowledge around barriers and challenges is also important in choosing where to target promotion. Considering all the efforts for recruitment, word of mouth and having a core group of participants as advocates were both prominent features in the sessions that got up and running first. The monitoring data shows that that walking football generated 254 participants and 2,510 attendances to the end of October, so it has generated a core of participants, many of whom have sustained their attendance.

Interestingly, some participants in the focus groups alluded to not wanting lots of new participants to be recruited, as it may diminish their experience. For a facility-based activity, there is a finite number of participants each session can hold, without having to have rotation of players.

There is, for some, a fine balancing act between not enough players to play, and too many players to make the experience valuable. The key learning in summary is:

- There is no 'one-size-fits all' approach to the design and delivery of walking football sessions, and as a result, it is important to allow plenty of time for market research, to develop an understanding of local needs and demand.
- Different methods of recruitment have different levels of success depending upon the target group and local area. For example, social media was an important tool for promotion in some areas, but less so in others. It is clear that promotion through word of mouth and having advocates within the sessions was important, in most areas.
- Being very clear on skill levels and who the sessions are aimed at is important – for example, people need to know the age range, if you need previous experience, whether sessions are mixed gender. There appear to be some pre-existing assumptions about what walking football involves and who it is aimed at, so marketing and promotion therefore needs careful consideration and needs to be very clear.
- There are different preferences on session formats, venues, and timing etc. As part of the planning and development phase, it is important to listen to the needs of target groups and be flexible in designing sessions that meet their needs and wants, e.g., training and drills versus more competitive games.
- Staff being very supportive is valuable to participants and having the Age UK lead with a presence at sessions worked well to help engagement.

**2. *How have local Age UKs worked with other organisations in their area to deliver walking football to older people, and what lessons can be drawn from this on how it impacts the successful delivery or otherwise of the sport?***

There have been some good examples of local Age UKs working with other organisations on this project, to access facilities, coaches, and for some promotion/recruitment activities. Where groups started early, good relationships have been developed. However, only one local Age UK (Age UK North Yorkshire Coast and Moors) has set up a new partnership with a new organisation where direct delivery and ownership has been handed over to them for sustainability. Age UK Buckinghamshire also have a very strong partner in Wycombe Wanderers, and this was a longstanding relationship pre-dating the start of cohort 3.

For the other groups, the partnership working has tended to be (1) one-off events or single touch points, including initial conversations to provide a coach or a venue booking or (2) for promotion/referral purposes rather than (3) taking ownership of delivery and for sustainability.

It is vital that local Age UKs accessed those single touch points to bring in football expertise and to secure a venue, and to broaden promotional activity, however the projects that have an organisation taking the lead for delivery post-Age UK cohort 3 funding have a stronger model of sustainability than where that is not the case. Local Age UKs can still signpost people into those sessions without having to oversee delivery, and this means their time and effort can be used to develop new projects and build the local infrastructure.

Most of the participants joined walking football due to seeing social media posts, or via word of mouth, with some isolated examples of people joining from a formal signpost/referral from another organisation, e.g., GP referral, diabetes clinic, social services etc. Additionally, sessions have been scheduled based on when facilities are available (which is understandable with

supply/demand constraints with local providers), but for those in the daytime, there are not any examples of local Age UKs strategically linking football sessions to other Age UK groups, e.g., walking groups/social events etc. There were examples in discussions with participants that they had tried to make their walking football session link up to other activities their friends/family were doing at the same time, therefore scheduling sessions with other organisations' programme of activity in mind may be a way to timetable and promote sessions, but these were singular examples from individuals, rather than coordinated and widespread.

As noted above, there has been a lot of effort to target promotion and recruitment activities, however the numbers generated through some promotional avenues are modest, and word of mouth was prominent throughout. Structured work with other local organisations to actively signpost people to the sessions through formal structures takes time, and 8-10 months is not a significant amount of time to set these up alongside setting up the sessions. Some areas have stronger local options for referral through partners, and some local Age UKs are able to work a lot closer with their network. The work with partners also needs to be strategic, where organisations are able to refer with confidence. A lot of the partner work evidenced was around signposting such as putting social media posts out, leaflets in reception/café areas, and posters on GP surgery walls. These are all helpful, but they are operating at surface level and are not necessarily embedding referral or generating formal pathways across the board, and this is the level of organisational work which is required to embed walking football centrally into the local offer, and not be a peripheral offer. This takes time, and some project leads reflected that the 8-10 months allocated to cohort 3 was ambitious to embed this level of partnership working.

Good quality partners with the necessary facility quality and supplementary amenities are also an important aspect of developing additional activity beyond the session, e.g., making use of social spaces/café areas to create a social element before/after the session. This is the space where friendships can be developed, and discussions that enhance the group cohesion, but also where additional signposting to other Age UK activities and support can take place. This can make the offer more than just a 1-hour structured session of walking football and create time and opportunity to bring people together and develop pathways and provide additional support. Utilising other organisations, or other parts of the local Age UK's offer, to attend the social elements afterwards is an example of how proactive work can put various support and services directly in front of participants. It appears that the facilities being used are suitable for the needs of the groups, and that longer-term bookings and some partnerships have developed through their networks. The key learning included:

- The amount of time required to set up a brand-new partnership can be longer than the 8-10 months afforded to it on cohort 3. Unless the partner is secured early, a large part of the delivery phase can be taken up with planning, as building relationships and understanding with new partners takes time.
- For future cohorts, applicants should have a confirmed partner before the commitment of central funds, to ensure projects can maximise delivery time with a facility, a strategy for promotion and operations. Some projects did not start until June/July rather than February/March as planned, largely due to issues with personnel in partner organisations changing or facilities not being available.
- Projects should have a plan for sustainability clearly built into the application for funding. Where possible, the project should start with the end in mind.

- Partnership working, particularly where the partnership is built with a plan for the project beyond any grant funding, can significantly improve sustainability of projects, particularly when the partner has a more substantial role than just providing a facility or access to a coach.
- There were limited examples of projects linking up with their County FA, with most projects having no input from them. For organisations like Age UK to assist with The FA strategy for walking football, greater consideration and involvement of County FAs should be included in future planning.
- For sustainability, some sessions were provided for free, and some had a charge from the outset, and for the project to be sustainable, there needs to be a delivery partner who has ownership over the administration and funding (or at least a plan when it hands over).
- Projects should have a partner with an identified facility to host the sessions. Some of the projects were delayed starting due to not having a suitable or available facility and this reduced the number of delivery weeks available. Without a place to play, the networks, promotion, referrals etc. are restricted as potential participants are made to wait.
- The venue should also be consistent (place, day, time, surface, indoor/outdoor) and where possible not be split over two venues on alternate weeks or have changes to the day/time.
- For sustainability, partnership working needs to consider the supply side issues around facilities, coaches, scheduling, promotion, and referral, and where the ownership sits post project funding, and the demand side, such as understanding local demographics, local tastes and preferences, existing provision, and operational issues such as transport links.

**3. *What are the motivations and barriers for older people participating in walking football both in terms of sparking initial interest in playing, and then sustaining that engagement?***

The evidence gathered for this question is the strongest of the three research questions. The motivations to play were broad, and some were common across participants, and some were very individual, but it was clear from the participants that these motivations to start had been met through their participation. There are multiple examples of this programme having a very strong positive impact on individuals, with participants rediscovering their love for football from their childhood or playing for the first time in their 70s. The motivations included wanting to improve physical fitness, improve mental wellbeing, improve social connections/reduce loneliness, to do something fun, to try something new and to develop individual traits such as confidence, anxiety levels, and taking a proactive approach to active ageing/ageing well. The outcomes and benefits those participants had experienced were extremely positive despite the variances in the amount of time they had actually been playing. The outcomes described were all consistent with the findings of the literature review, and predominantly focused on physical health, mental wellbeing, individual development, and social and community development.

Securing a facility and time slot that was suitable for the group in an environment that was suitable was important, and some groups had to change their venue/time due to issues. Consideration of some of the nuances between different participants was also important, for example using all-female coaches and volunteers for female sessions.

In terms of barriers, price can be a barrier to participation for any activity, however it was not cited often in this evaluation for those that have regularly participated. Participants in the focus

groups indicated that they would be willing to pay. It was clear in the guidelines issued to local Age UKs that it is good practice to start charging early on in the process to create a pool of funds to help to sustain the activity beyond the central funding. It was also outlined that the provision of local Age UK services should not cost money, therefore not charging participants means that there is a greater risk of groups not sustaining if they have not built up a pot of money from subscriptions. In some areas sessions were free and remained free. In others, the first session was free then there was a charge afterwards.

Practical barriers are also relevant for any place-based activity, such as facilities having a car park or good transport links were important for those without access to a car, there were examples where participants/volunteers were giving others a lift to the session, which is positive, but has risks attached should the driver stop attending as this is ad-hoc. A high quality facility with a place to change, toilets and a social area are all considerations when planning where a new session would be taking place. Sustaining the engagement is not just about the quality of the session offered, but the access to it, consistency with day, time and venue, the opportunities it creates and the network of people and organisations it provides as pathways to additional engagement elsewhere. There were also some decisions made in some areas which may not help to overcome barriers and, in hindsight could have been avoided, such as running sessions fortnightly and then adding a new group and splitting delivery between two venues causing extra administration work. Additionally, work with minority / hard to reach groups has taken some time to develop, for example trying to recruit players from Muslim communities during the Ramadan observance. Planning the offer around the local context is a key learning point. Other points have developed, such as the importance of the environment/safe spaces, all-female coaches for female groups, meeting the demands of the group in terms of the level of competition/desire to play games versus skill based for those wanting an introduction to the game. Injury and risk of injury are also issues which have prevented attendance for some participants, and this links to the wider points around sustainability planning requiring considerations of a wider remit, such as health and safety etc. The key learning included:

- There were varied motivations for taking part in walking football and included being football fans, wanting to improve fitness level and overall health and wellbeing as well as being part of a rehabilitation programme from illness or surgery.
- The opportunity to socialise and being a regular programmed activity in a participants week was also a key motivating factor.
- Physical benefits that were cited included improvements in fitness levels, losing weight and improvements in overall energy levels.
- Mental wellbeing benefits included the opportunities to make new friends, reduce loneliness and improving confidence levels, an opportunity to have some time out and away from other challenges in life. Participants reported feeling a lift in their mood and having a more positive outlook on life.
- Project leads and participants outlined that securing appropriate facilities and the scheduling of sessions was a barrier, fitting around pre-existing bookings, sessions being cancelled, time constraints around work or caregiving commitments,
- Managing injuries and health conditions also presented challenges, whilst low attendance numbers and the struggle to attract a balanced gender mix in mixed sessions were also discussed.

- Project leads highlighted the diverse range of abilities, physical literacy levels, and football experience among participants was a barrier for some. Balancing these differences took time to ensure that session content effectively catered to the needs of all.
- In certain regions project leads noted an oversaturation of walking football on offer locally, which impacted upon demand.

## 8.2 Progress against the programme theory (Theory of Change model)

It is important in a summative report to look at the extent to which a programme met the assumed logic for it, as determined by the evaluation team, not Age UK, as articulated in Figure 2. Figure 5 articulates the outputs, outcomes, and impacts listed for the project, with the evaluation teams' assessment of the extent to which cohort 3 achieved it, and the strength of the evidence.

The table uses a RAG rating, with green indicating a strong assessment of provision where the project achieved its aim, amber indicating a moderate assessment where some aims were met and red indicating areas to develop where aims were unmet/limited in nature.

*Figure 5 Project logic model progress*

<b>OUTPUTS</b>	<b>Extent achieved?</b>	<b>Strength of evidence</b>
Number of people recruited	Green	Green
Number of people attending each week	Amber	Green
Number of people participating to the end of 2023	Green	Green
Number of sessions delivered	Green	Green
Number of external organisations linked to the delivery	Amber	Green
<b>OUTCOMES</b>		
Involvement leads to a positive impact on participants' physical wellbeing	Green	Green
Involvement leads to a positive impact on participants' mental wellbeing	Green	Amber
Involvement leads to a positive impact on participants' social connections	Green	Amber
Engagement with local partners develops and improves	Amber	Amber
Understanding how to identify and engage older people with walking football	Green	Green
Understanding more about the barriers and motivations for older adults to take up walking football	Green	Green
<b>IMPACT</b>		
Improvement in overall wellbeing and social connections	Green	Green
Sustained network of local people playing walking football	Green	Green
Greater understanding of what works from a range of partners	Amber	Green
New partnerships are developed, embedded, and sustained	Red	Amber
Reduction of barriers and future programmes developed based on evidence	Amber	Amber



### **Extent achieved, areas in amber:**

**OUTPUT: Number of people attending each week.** The monitoring report data outlines a wide range of attendees and attendance in the 13 groups, from 45 attendance in one to 458 in another. The monitoring data demonstrates that not all projects generated comparative numbers of people or attendances, some of which due to a delayed start.

**OUTPUT: Number of external organisations linked to the delivery.** The number of organisations involved in formal aspects of delivery were fewer than anticipated from the applications. For some, these partnerships were pivotal and central, but for others, partnership working was limited, and operated on a transactional level.

**OUTCOME: Engagement with local partners develops and improves.** Similar to the output, for some, the engagement with local partners developed over time and improved to the point of formal handover. For other projects, local partners operated on a surface, transactional level and did not develop beyond the initial engagement.

**IMPACT: Greater understanding of what works from a range of partners.** The evaluation has picked up really important feedback from delivery partners (mainly from the two football club community teams involved the most), and less from peripheral partners.

**IMPACT: Reduction of barriers and future programmes developed based on evidence.** The learning from project leads helped to understand the barriers faced when setting up programmes, but less so on how to reduce these barriers. As each local area varies significantly, barriers were not homogenous, and reducing those barriers was related to the local issue causing it.

### **Extent achieved, areas in red:**

**IMPACT: New partnerships are developed, embedded, and sustained.** This is red, as only one project genuinely created a new partnership then embedded it to delivery for the purpose of sustaining it (Age UK North Yorkshire Coast and Moors). Age UK Buckinghamshire also worked well with Wycombe Wanderers, but this was not a new partnership, as they had been involved in previous Age UK walking football cohorts. Other existing partnerships were utilised well and enhanced.

### **Strength of evidence, areas in amber:**

**OUTCOME: Involvement leads to a positive impact on participants' mental wellbeing.** The evidence base for this is, in a qualitative evaluation, based on individuals; stories and thematic narrative which outlines all the benefits participants have found. However, for the strength of evidence to be more robust, a pre/post survey with questions on mental wellbeing to track changes would enhance the evidence base.

**OUTCOME: Involvement leads to a positive impact on participants' social connections.** Similar to mental health, to track changes in social connections, a pre/post tracking survey would strengthen the evidence base, similar to the physical activity tracking through the monitoring reports.

**OUTCOME: Engagement with local partners develops and improves.** This is amber due to the volume of local partners being less than originally envisaged, and therefore fewer consultations with partners, and where they have taken place, they have largely been with organisations from a similar sector (community arm of football clubs).

**IMPACT: New partnerships are developed, embedded, and sustained.** As with the point above, the evidence for new partnerships being developed, embedded, and sustained comes predominantly from one project.

**IMPACT: Reduction of barriers and future programmes developed based on evidence.** The evaluation has uncovered the barriers attached to the programme from participants, but in the 10 month timeframe the cohort 3 projects have anecdotal evidence of tackling only some of those issues (e.g. changing the day and time to a more suitable environment), however in the timeframe it is difficult to do this across 8 local Age UKs. For future programmes there is a base of evidence around good practice in particular areas, but with limited involvement in cohort 3 from partners such as County FAs and the wider health sector (where there was limited direct involvement), the base of evidence is weighted more towards the delivery aspects of the programme.

The evaluation was focussed on the qualitative feedback from cohort 3 of the walking football programme, and the evidence collected through the research has provided some really useful insights and action points for future delivery. Where the programme looked to have a positive impact on participants' physical wellbeing, mental wellbeing and social connections, the feedback was positive, however the strength of evidence is stronger for physical wellbeing as activity levels were tracked as part of the monitoring forms. Aspects of mental wellbeing and social connections were not tracked quantitatively in this evaluation, e.g. using validated questions on a pre/post survey for comparison. If these are priority areas for the future, consideration of quantitative tracking should be taken.

Finally, the additional analysis by the central Age UK team demonstrated that physical activity levels recorded a statistically significant increase in participants' activity levels between baseline and the 3-month and 9-month points. This quantitative data, coupled with the qualitative stories presented here (thematically and individually), outline that cohort 3 of the walking football has improved the physical wellbeing of many participants, and this very much corresponds with the findings in the literature review from previous studies.

## APPENDIX 1: LITERATURE REVIEW SEARCH TERMS

Walking football plus older adults / older people / elderly / people with long term health conditions plus different combinations of the following search terms will be used in the searches:

### Targeted search terms

Review aims	Search terms
Barriers and enablers to participation in walking football	Barriers Enablers Motivators
Physical health	Physical health Mental health
Mental wellbeing	Mental wellbeing Subjective wellbeing Life satisfaction Happiness Anxiety Worthwhileness
Individual development	Personal development Skills Confidence
Social and community development	Social capital Social trust Communities Friendships Belonging Loneliness
What works / what doesn't work in walking football interventions	What works Successes Challenges Lessons learned Feedback Sustainability
Partnership working to develop / deliver / engage older people in walking football interventions.	Partnership working Working with partners

## APPENDIX 2. FEEDBACK FROM LOCAL AGE UK STAFF: COHORTS 1 & 2

The following analysis is from the online survey of staff (project leads) from cohorts 1 & 2 (based on 33 respondents from the 35 funded partners).

### Partnership with other organisations

Partnerships have been identified as a crucial aspect of the walking football groups, with 22 (67%) groups opting to collaborate with other organisations or groups for delivery. Groups worked with various partners, including football club community trusts, local football groups, leisure centres, local charities, and councils.

Respondents highlighted several strengths and benefits of working with delivery partners. The most commonly mentioned strengths were partners' expertise and commitment to the project (10, 30%), the support of qualified and engaging coaches (7, 21%), partners' experience in delivering walking football programmes and engaging with the community (3, 9%), access to suitable venues for delivery (3, 9%), and effective teamwork (3, 9%).

*"We worked as a team to problem solve and overcome challenges. We have worked together previously which meant we were able to communicate well and focus on the task from the word go."*

*"The two coaches who delivered the project from were extremely professional and made the participants feel very welcomed."*

*"Understanding each other's roles and responsibilities, ways of working particularly round communication. Their staff have good expertise and experience of walking football."*

There were few challenges mentioned in relation to working with delivery partners. However, respondents did highlight issues such as limited access to facilities or delivery staff. Some respondents mentioned coaches being unavailable or cancelling at the last minute (2, 6%), facility hire concerns (2, 6%), and general costs associated with these challenges (1, 3%). Weather conditions during the autumn/winter period were also mentioned (2).

*"Cancellations of the coach for a number of sessions with very little notice. The coach we had from the start built some good relationships with participants, in particular supporting some of our participants with memory loss."*

*"Communication could have been better; they were very slow to respond to our queries. On a few occasions we were stopped at short notice of using the hall because they booked another activity in to the venue."*

### Changes to the project (outside the scope of the original plans)

In the majority of cases, the groups ran as planned or with minor changes to their structure. The changes mentioned by respondents mainly focused on logistical aspects of the project, including adjustments to the venue, session dates, and times (6, 18%). Two respondents reported participating in a walking football league (initiated by participants), while two others mentioned extending the project's duration.

*"We had not initially planned to participate in a league – this development was initiated by the members, who wanted to play friendlies with teams. Having gained in confidence, contact was made with the FA to play competitively."*

*“The times of the sessions were changed following feedback from participants who suggested that more people would be able to attend the sessions later after finishing work etc. This proved to be a move for both sessions as more people were able to attend.”*

*“Due to running services in partnership we were able to deliver more activities than the original bid, so our project was extended for several months.”*

## **Venue**

The majority of respondents stated that they used either a leisure centre or a 3G pitch, with many utilising both options throughout the project, depending on the weather. In most cases, this was made possible by selecting a facility that provided both indoor and outdoor spaces, avoiding the need to use separate venues.

*“We started out on a 3G pitch out of town but moved indoors to the sports hall of the main sports centre during the winter months.”*

*“The activity centres had both indoor and outdoor facilities. It moved indoors for the winter.”*

Respondents regarded their chosen venues as both strengths and weaknesses, particularly with regard to weather conditions and COVID-19, particularly as cohort 1 started in spring 2021. Utilising an outdoor 3G surface ensured safe and usable pitches throughout the year, except during severe weather. Indoor facilities were ideal during adverse weather conditions, but concerns arose when COVID-19 rates were high. Additionally, the location of the venue was considered important for ease of access to the sessions. Overall, an easily accessible facility with both indoor and outdoor options was deemed ideal, along with a pragmatic approach and awareness that adjustments to sessions might be necessary throughout the project.

## **Target audience**

The top three target groups for the project were identified as individuals with long-term health conditions (21, 64%), people from lower socio-economic backgrounds (19, 58%), and individuals from areas with high levels of deprivation (16, 49%). This coincided with the prescribed target groups that were identified by Sport England for partners receiving grants, with participants having to be from one of those three groups. However, partners in receipt of an FA grant could engage anyone.

Social media and word of mouth were the most commonly used channels for promoting the walking football programmes. Leaflets, newspaper & community magazine advertisements and posters were also successful in attracting participants. In a few cases, local TV and radio advertisements/mentions were utilised. A mixed approach was deemed crucial for success.

*“We have used social media, speaking to other clients who attend other activities, talking about the group at engagement events and talking to health colleagues to raise awareness in case it would help their patients.”*

*“We initially used mainly social media. Our members have increased dramatically since we started advertising in local community magazines.”*

*“Social media cheaper but doesn't reach all of target audience. Need mixed approach.”*

## **Wider benefits of engagement in the programme**

*“To summarise and a phrase I advocate... we are changing people's lives.”*

Feedback from respondents highlighted the profoundly positive impact of the programme on participants' physical, mental, and social wellbeing. Improved fitness and physical health were observed, while mentally and socially, the programme was credited with boosting participants' confidence, motivation, and reducing social isolation. Meaningful interaction, camaraderie, and enjoyment were also mentioned.

The following quotes emphasise the significant positive effects on participants:

*“The programme had a huge impact on the people involved in the programme. For many with a long-term health condition or after losing loved ones, the sessions were a new lease of life. Players had something to look forward to that benefited them mentally and physically improving fitness, being part of a community and making friends.”*

*“The feedback we received from players about the benefits to their physical, mental, and social health was, frankly, staggering. Many of them stated that the sessions have had an enormously beneficial impact on their physical health in terms of mobility and managing aches and pains, but by far the most common comment we received about sessions was how the players have benefitted from the opportunity to make new friends and have a laugh together. Many of them have said it has been a lifeline in terms of getting out of their house regularly, and I am particularly proud of the fact that our female players have said they have finally been able to access and enjoy playing football as a result of the structure put in place within our sessions.”*

### **Sustainability and expansion of walking football groups**

In total, 32 respondents (97%) stated that their walking football groups intended to continue beyond the grant period, although these cohorts are not part of the evaluation. Only one respondent mentioned that their group would not be financially viable to continue due to low participant numbers. Among those intending to continue, the majority planned to utilise volunteers to run the sessions and charge a small fee to participants, ranging from £2.50 to £5.50 per session.

Respondents' feedback highlighted that 24 groups (73%) intended to extend, expand, or grow their current walking football provision. Most respondents aimed to achieve this by steadily increasing the number of participants in a sustainable manner. Once consistent numbers were achieved on a weekly basis, they planned to expand to more than one group or session. Some notable suggestions included attracting younger players, promoting women's walking football, targeting specific health conditions, or delivering sessions in areas with high levels of deprivation.

When asked about whether joining a league is something that appeals to respondents, 23 (60%) said their group would be interested in joining a friendly league, 12 (36%) a competitive league, whilst a further (27%) said there is no interest for their group to join a league. Additionally, in terms of *setting up* a league (if there was funding available from Age UK), 13 respondents (39%) said it would appeal to them.

### **FA platform**

In total, 29 (76%) of respondents said their walking football sessions are set up on the FA Events Platform, however only 10 (30%) said their participants had used the platform to book on to a session. Despite a small number of comments citing the benefits in terms of streamlining registration/reporting of data, the platform was not widely used. The main challenges cited were that the platform was perceived as not being particularly easy to use or intuitive, whilst many of the participants are not IT/computer literate and did not wish to use the platform. In total, only



7 (21%) of respondents stated they will/would continue to use the FA Events Platform to manage their walking football group in the long-term.

### **Grant funding**

Overall, the majority of respondents (29, 88%) expressed satisfaction with the grant amount provided, deeming it sufficient to successfully carry out their walking football programmes. However, many respondents also conveyed the belief that additional funding would enable them to achieve even greater outcomes. Following feedback from project leads in C1 and C2, the amount of grant funding available was increased. Their comments reflect the potential for expanded opportunities and enhanced programme offerings. Here are a few examples illustrating their perspectives:

*"I feel that the grant amount was enough to run sessions in a basic, small-scale format. However, with a higher grant amount for staff hours, I feel that we would be able to target our marketing even more and even organise tournaments and community events to further promote the programme."*

*"This gave a great start to the project and enabled continued sessions to engage participants without worrying about losing money and having to charge more."*

### **Key points**

- Partnerships with various organisations have been pivotal in the success of walking football programmes.
- Working with delivery partners provided expertise, coaching support, suitable venues, and effective teamwork.
- Challenges were minimal, including issues with facility access, coach availability, and weather conditions.
- The groups generally ran as planned, with minor changes made to logistical aspects.
- Leisure centres and 3G pitches were the most commonly used venues, with a preference for those offering both indoor and outdoor spaces.
- The target audience primarily consisted of individuals with long-term health conditions, those from lower socio-economic backgrounds, and areas with high levels of deprivation.
- Social media, word of mouth, and a mixed marketing approach were effective in attracting participants.
- The benefits of engagement included improved physical, mental, and social wellbeing, with participants expressing increased fitness, confidence, motivation, and reduced social isolation.
- The majority of walking football groups were sustainable and intended to continue beyond the grant period.
- Plans for expansion and growth were in place, targeting different demographics and areas.