

Parliamentary Briefing

Scottish Government debate, Thursday 25 April 2019
Changing Lives through Sport and Physical Activity



Summary

- Walking is a key way for people to be physically active and is playing an important role in the increase in levels of physical activity in Scotland, helping to deliver wider public health outcomes.
- Being more active can lead to transformational change in people's lives – our own members' stories are inspirational in demonstrating this. Ramblers Scotland is pleased to play a role in encouraging people to walk more and improve their health.
- Walking can support volunteering activity and bring economic benefits as well as improved health.
- There is a need for continued investment in infrastructure and promotion to capitalise on the progress that has already been made and ensure the benefits are enjoyed by all sectors of society.

Changing lives through walking

Walking is acknowledged as being the easiest way of keeping active for most people and is a useful pathway to other activities and sports once an enhanced level of fitness has been reached. There is also [evidence](#) that walking in a group provides benefits beyond improved health by boosting social interactions, providing an important point of contact for people who feel lonely or those suffering from depression. It's likely that walking as part of a group can also be more motivational and encourage people to walk more regularly. Many Ramblers members have personally seen positive transformations in their daily lives from walking more with a group. These include [Jim Snodgrass](#), who had a history of physical and mental health issues. After the sad death of his wife, he was advised by his GP to join South Queensferry Ramblers and is now a regular and active walk leader with the group, inspiring many others to start walking. Likewise, [Andrea Tomečková](#) was suffering from work-related stress which was leading to serious mental health problems until she joined Edinburgh Young Walkers.

Benefits of increasing physical activity through walking

According to the [National Walking Strategy](#), physical inactivity contributes to over 2,500 premature deaths in Scotland each year and costs the NHS in Scotland around £94.1 million annually. It is now recognised that lack of physical activity is a risk factor in a number of diseases from type 2 diabetes, stroke, heart attacks and some common cancers. While good progress is being made in addressing some health issues, having a population which is more physically active could decrease the risk of dying early by 30%. That also includes benefits to our mental health and wellbeing, especially if we are being active in the natural environment, with a 30% reduction in the risk of depression achievable too.

We welcome the Scottish Government's recognition of the importance of walking in helping the Scottish population to be more active in their daily lives. The National Walking Strategy has been [credited](#) with contributing to a 13% rise in recreational walking over 6 years to 2018. Ramblers Scotland is pleased to be partners on the National Walking Strategy delivery forum, playing a role in its implementation. In addition, as noted in the [2017 Scottish Household Survey](#):

Participation in all physical activity and sport remained relatively constant between 2007 and 2010 (around 72 per cent). Recently people have become more active (rising to 75 per cent in 2011 and again to 81 per cent in 2017). The rise in physical activity is driven by the rise in recreational walking. Recreational walking (for at least 30 minutes) has consistently been the most common type of physical activity. Participation has risen from 57 per cent in 2011 to 70 per cent in 2017.

How to increase regular walking activity

Walking directly contributes towards delivering the Scottish Government's [public health priorities](#), particularly those to help create vibrant, healthy and safe communities, improve our mental wellbeing and increase physical activity. This could be through outdoor recreation or active travel which are both important ways of keeping active and counteracting the impact of our mainly sedentary lifestyles. Many people leave their desks to walk at lunchtime as well as enjoying walking in their leisure time. But we are aware that there is much more to be done to increase physical activity levels, including addressing the needs of those who are currently not active enough for their health. In 2017, we commissioned a major independent [survey](#) which showed that 75% of respondents believed that more paths on the ground and on maps would help more people enjoy Scotland's outdoors. Consistently, the younger the survey respondent, the less knowledge they had of where to walk in Scotland. These findings informed the creation of our [Out There](#) campaign which is helping people to live more active lives by supporting path

creation and maintenance, getting more paths on maps and helping to break down the barriers to getting outdoors. To encourage more young people to get outdoors we created a series of [short films](#) in partnership with Young Scot, the Scottish Government and Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH). We are also running a Young Adult Development project, part-funded by the Scottish Government, which is engaging with 18-26 year olds to increase their participation in walking and volunteering.

Walking for everyday journeys to work, school, the shops or to access services is another crucial way of increasing physical activity in our daily lives. In [2017](#), 21% of all journeys were walked, with 2% of journeys undertaken by bike. Yet 70% of workers still commute by car or van, and 36% of commuting trips are under 5km which suggests there is a huge potential in encouraging modal shift to more active modes, bringing benefits to physical and mental health, the environment, economy and our communities.

[A recent study](#) demonstrated that walking accounts for 96% of all journey stages which are actively travelled. In terms of social justice, the study also demonstrated that people living in the most deprived areas were more likely to undertake journeys by active travel (and predominantly by walking) than those in the least deprived areas. This helps to demonstrate that greater investment in walking will specifically benefit those living in areas of deprivation and will help to reduce inequalities. Such investment includes measures such as pedestrianisation of streets, introduction of 20mph default speed limits, enforcement of pavement parking, maintenance of pavements and paths, all of which will also improve safety and air quality. It is also important to improve mapping and route development, giving people active travel options.

The value of volunteering

Sport is well known as a sector that is reliant upon the hard work of volunteers. We welcome the Scottish Government's recognition in the [Programme for Government](#) that "Volunteering is transformational: for the volunteer, for the beneficiary and for communities". Around 20% of Ramblers Scotland members volunteer for the organisation, whether by leading walks or coordinating their groups' activities and walk programmes. They also contribute to their local communities through [creating and maintaining paths](#) or by producing [route guides](#). Together this volunteering activity makes a huge contribution to civic society, in encouraging more people to walk more.

The need for investment

It is clearly important to continue investing in sport and physical activity. For walking this means funding for paths, bridges, signposts and other infrastructure, as well as for promotion and the provision of information. Yet there is uncertainty about much of the future funding in this sector. For example the rural payments [Improving Public Access](#) fund has invested £8m over the past 5 years, but this has now come to an end with no indication of future direction. The Scottish Government's [monitoring of expenditure](#) related to public access ended in March 2016 so it's difficult to know current indications, but anecdotally we are aware that cuts in local authority budgets have led to significant impacts on ranger services, access officers and other areas which are important for getting people active outdoors.

Yet there is a massive economic benefit which arises from walking-related activities; this not only benefits health but also directly supports rural economies. VisitScotland has estimated the [value to the Scottish economy of walking tourism](#) at £1.26 billion per year. SNH's 2012 [Scottish Recreation Survey](#) estimated the value of expenditure during visits to the outdoors by Scottish residents at around £2.6 billion. We welcomed the £6m [Rural Tourism Infrastructure Fund](#) which includes support for rural path projects and recognise the government has increased funding for active travel. However, with overall reductions in public spending, walking and outdoor recreation more generally are in need of much more support.

By investing in achieving public health outcomes, particularly through both outdoor recreation and active travel, the Government can make progress in achieving its aim of creating a more healthy, wealthy and active Scotland and enabling people to transform their lives through increased physical activity.

Ramblers Scotland is a membership organisation and charity with a grassroots network of 54 local groups who run 3,500 group walks a year, organised and led by experienced volunteers. As the representative body for walkers in Scotland and a governing body of sport, we work to champion walking, protect and promote access rights and develop our path networks. We are part of the Ramblers, Britain's walking charity.

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