



## This summary shares some key findings from the research project, *Walking Publics / Walking Arts: Walking, Wellbeing and Community during COVID-19*.

The health, wellbeing and environmental benefits of walking are well established: walking is good for people and our planet. Walking can also be used in creative ways to explore place, build community, make art, have fun and start conversations. It is therefore important to understand the impact COVID-19 had on walking in the UK. We asked how the pandemic changed why, where and when people walked. We also learnt about challenges and barriers to walking and how creative activity supported people to walk. Our definition of walking is inclusive of all kinds of bodies and includes wheelchairs, mobility scooters, walking aids or other technologies to help Disabled people and anyone with mobility issues to move around.

The research was funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) and was led by Principal Investigator Dee Heddon (University of Glasgow) in collaboration with Co-Investigators Maggie O'Neill (University College Cork), Clare Qualmann (University of East London), Morag Rose (University of Liverpool), Research Associate Harry Wilson (University of Glasgow) with Project Assistant Eleanor Capaldi (University of Glasgow) and Data Analyst Matthew Law. The team worked in partnership with a range of walking and cultural organisations including Arts Canteen, Glasgow Life, Living Streets, MOLA (Museum of London Archaeology), Open Clasp Theatre Company, Paths for All, Ramblers Scotland, and Sheffield Environmental Movement. Carole Wright was Project Advisor.

One of the research methods we used was a public survey, which is the main focus of this summary. 1221 people completed our online questionnaire and our findings support and supplement existing research on the value of walking for health and wellbeing. We also asked about creative walking; by 'creative walking' we mean:

**Activities that people or groups may undertake whilst walking, which have some kind of imaginative, playful or task-based framework. This could include, for example, looking for rainbow posters or red cars, drawing shapes on maps or hunting for treasure using digital apps or taking photographs to share online. It also includes creative interventions, made by others, that you may encounter on a walk (eg chalk messages, art trails, fairy trails, knitted decorations or similar).**

Through our research we discovered a range of examples of people using imaginative, task-based and artistic methods to encourage and enhance their experiences of walking throughout the pandemic, and the wider positive impact this delivered. The quotes shared here are taken directly from survey responses.

# #WalkCreate:

UNDERSTANDING  
WALKING AND CREATIVITY  
DURING COVID-19

## RESEARCH FINDINGS

Lockdown restrictions were the catalyst for some people to explore their local environment in new and creative ways, which they felt were very positive.

*"Being restricted on where I could go has made me really explore my local and neighbouring boroughs."*

*"Walking through COVID taught me to love where I live."*

Simple interventions, such as pebble trails or window posters, helped create a sense of community and mitigated against isolation.

*"Walking for me was a way to connect to my community which felt so important during this time. Just seeing other people walking felt reassuring, or seeing pictures people had painted on the pavement outside their house or boxes of books for people to help themselves to, or pebbles people had painted for people to take, was really reassuring and inspiring."*

Many people found walking a useful tool for their mental health and wellbeing, and this effect was enhanced through the use of creative methods alongside walking.

*"Makes me feel good, soothing for the soul, enriches wellbeing."*

*"It's a way of maintaining creativity and can help reduce the stress of lockdown."*

Daily walking helped establish a beneficial routine when working from home and / or feeling overwhelmed by the impact of COVID-19.

*"Walking is a good way to separate home and work life."*

*"My job was really stressful during the first lockdown so it was good to have some time and space away from work."*

Nature, green space and encounters with wildlife, such as listening to birdsong, provided solace and inspiration; local parks played a vital role in communities.

*"[The creative walks have] felt so magical! I do think I've reconnected with nature during the pandemic. I used to think I had to go far outside of Glasgow to experience nature, but there's loads of nature right here on my doorstep."*

Some families found that walking together created a safe space for conversation with their children, and that creative activities encouraged children to walk.

*"My daily walks with my child have been one of the great silver linings of the situation – it was a special time together and we talked for longer and about topics, including sensitive ones, in a way which wouldn't have been possible had we been sitting at home."*

Photography, and sharing walks online, helped individuals make sense of what was happening and strengthened connections between people who could not be physically close.

*"Sharing photos has been so uplifting and a brilliant way to connect with distant friends and family, so I will certainly carry on."*

*"I've been pleased that 'group' walking over Twitter and WhatsApp has allowed me to walk 'with' people from all over the world."*

There are many pre-existing barriers to walking, including material factors (eg poor pavements, lack of public toilets), cultural factors (eg harassment and safety fears) and personal circumstances (eg lack of time or opportunity).

*"Access to my local park isn't safe due to cars on pavements."*

*"As a wheelchair user who loves walking, I feel frustrated by the lack of thought, info, creative energy given to accessible walking activities."*

These barriers were magnified during the pandemic but were often experienced differently depending on personal experiences. For example, many people chose to avoid busy locations and reported concerns around social distancing and sharing space, whereas, for others, quieter streets often felt more intimidating and unsafe. For both groups, the perceived threat limited their movement.

*"I was in the clinically extremely vulnerable group so was shielding - I walked a lot less than I would have liked to because green spaces were very busy and there were no protected times or routes for those at higher risk."*

*"I did face harassment and aggressive behaviour when out with my daughter, and I was more scared about going out because of that, and because there were less people about I felt more vulnerable."*

## SUSTAINING AND SUPPORTING WALKING

Our research foregrounds just how important walking was to many people during the pandemic – some even described it as lifesaving. What we also reveal here are the additional benefits that creative walking can have for individuals, families and communities, further enhancing health and wellbeing through stimulating the imagination, motivating behaviour, and enacting ways to connect safely across physical distances. Our research demonstrates that creative walking can be a powerful tool for good, helping to encourage more people to walk.

However, the conditions must be in place for people to sustain good walking habits, and walking should not be viewed as a panacea or replacement for wider social and health care support. The majority of our respondents hope to build on their pandemic walking and continue to walk but express concern this may not be possible for a variety of reasons, including pressures on time. There are also barriers which prevent some people ever taking part in creative walking. These can be categorised into three main areas and we believe action should be taken to tackle these problems:

### I) MATERIAL CONDITIONS

Policy and resources must be focused on creating an accessible environment which will benefit every kind of body. A holistic approach should be taken to what is meant by access, which includes (but is not limited to) infrastructure, such as adequate public toilet provision, and more seating areas with a variety of different benches. Any future pandemic response must be aware of the negative impact on many people if these facilities are closed. We need better quality pavements and pedestrian routes with street clutter minimised where possible. Design should integrate access for Disabled People. Maintenance and protection of routes, parks and green spaces is also vitally important.

### II) CULTURAL CHANGES

We need to create a culture where walking is a safe and appealing activity for everyone. Harassment and fear of harassment prevents many people from participating equally in walking activities. Policy makers must do more to tackle hate crime, whilst individuals and walking organisations should consider how they can be better allies. The dominance of cars must also be challenged and pedestrians should be kept as safe from traffic as possible. As above, this necessitates provision of good quality infrastructure including pavements, paths and walking routes.

### III) ACCESS TO OPPORTUNITIES

Many people are unaware of creative walking initiatives and the diverse benefits that creative walking can bring, including introducing people to walking activity and fostering cultural participation and empowerment. There is work to be done by both cultural and walking organisations, supported with appropriate resources, to confidently engage with creative walking.

Artists, cultural organisations and community groups could, and should, be supported to develop resources to encourage participation in creative walking so that its benefits can be more widely realised. Developing resources, which promote creative walking and encourage its adoption in a wide range of contexts, would enable more people to explore how it could benefit them. It could also help cultural organisations become more sustainable in the event of future lockdowns.

## CONCLUSIONS AND MORE INFORMATION

As many more people worked from home during the pandemic, it became increasingly important that people found ways to create or maintain a work-life balance. Walking was seen as an important cornerstone for many in achieving that. Going forward, with many people electing to continue working from home or adopting a hybrid working model, the lessons learned during the pandemic can usefully be applied to life beyond it.

Walking can be a powerful tool, bringing joy, delight and comfort. It can also facilitate an enhanced sense of community connection and belonging, both in local neighbourhoods and with nature and green space. Simple creative walking initiatives can enhance all these benefits. Our research demonstrates how positive outcomes may emerge out of restrictions and offer respite, solace, fun and inspiration. We want to ensure that everyone who wants to can walk well into the future. During the pandemic, small, everyday moments of magic were created by our footsteps. We believe these desire lines can develop into sustainable and important new paths.

For more information about this research please see [www.walkcreate.org](http://www.walkcreate.org)

As well as more details on our survey findings this includes our digital gallery of artists' walking work and information about a series of specially commissioned new walking art works. We have also collaborated with artists across the UK to develop a free online resource, *The Walkbook: Recipes for Walking & Wellbeing*. This offers creative responses to the challenges people have experienced in participating in walking during COVID-19 and hopefully inspires people to continue, or begin, to walk beyond it.

To contact the authors please email Morag Rose [mlrose@liverpool.ac.uk](mailto:mlrose@liverpool.ac.uk)  
May 2022

Funded by:



Arts and  
Humanities  
Research Council

Arts Canteen, Glasgow Life, Living Streets, MOLA,  
Open Clasp Theatre Company, Paths For All,  
Ramblers Scotland, Sheffield Environmental Movement,  
University College Cork, University of East London,  
University of Glasgow, University of Liverpool.

### FRONT COVER: TOP TO BOTTOM FROM LEFT

Emmie Alderson, *#everydaypilgrimage*  
Claire Hind, *To the Rocks* - Image credit: Amalie Iona  
Sara Shaarawi and Catrin Evans, *Niqabi Ninja* - Image credit: Tiu Makkonen  
Genevieve Rudd in partnership with originalprojects, *Yarmouth Spring Eternal* -  
Image credit: Becky Demmen/Supporting Your Art  
Olivia Furber and Ramzi Maqdisi, *The Land's Heart is Greater than its Map* -  
Image credit: Hadeel Sameera  
Phil Smith working with Helen Billingham as Crab and Bee, *Coxside Smoke Signal*  
(*final action*) - Image credit: Take a Part  
Outshift: Rachel Henson and Neil Manuell, *Flickers*  
Sheila MacNeill, *Masking the Canal*  
Alma Boyes, *The Cordwainer* (2004) - Image credit: Clare Qualmann  
Philip Bentham and Frank Dobson, *Astronomical Clock* (on Bracken House,  
London, 1959) - Image credit: Clare Qualmann  
Marsha Burke, *Finders Keepers*  
Kate Morton, *Dreaming of an Endless Landscape*

### BACK COVER: TOP TO BOTTOM FROM LEFT

Susie Rose Dalton, *Untitled (Unfred porcelain sentences)*  
Jo Delafons, *Lockdown Walk Boxes*  
Louise McVey, *Alexandra Parade Heart* - Image credit: John Devlin  
Ollie the Dog - Image credit: Harry Wilson  
Shirley Chubb, *Metatarsal Walk 1*

