

Healthy Walking

Evaluation Summary, July 2025

The Healthy Walking pilot was funded firstly to understand the barriers to walking across population groups who do not walk as much in Tower Hamlets and secondly to co-produce walking interventions which tackled these barriers. It was delivered from July 2024 – March 2025 by the Bromley by Bow Centre and funded by Tower Hamlets Public Health. This mixed methods evaluation explores learning about the process, activity and impact of this project and indicates opportunities for this learning.



- In Tower Hamlets, 26% of adults do not attain 30 minutes of exercise a week (Sports England, 2024).
- Whilst walking rates are high within adults' daily lives (Sustrans, 2023), walking for pleasure or exercise is not as common: 67.4% walked for pleasure across the year, compared to 71.4% across London (Sports England, 2024).
- Recent research (Kaizen Partnership, 2024) suggests substantial local appetite for walking groups as sites for exercise, whilst social isolation and disconnection is consistently raised as concerns across Tower Hamlets.
- Tower Hamlets has good access to green space, and high housing density (ONS, 2020): changed use of outdoor space could therefore have outsize effect on individuals' quality of life.
- Finally, walking is an inherently safe physical activity for many unable to take part in other forms of exercise (Hanson and Jones, 2015).

How did the project work with target groups to develop interventions which addressed the barriers they faced?

Healthy Walking focused on three target groups who were identified as being less likely to engage in walking for pleasure or exercise: parents/carers, adults with learning disabilities and adults with health conditions, particularly older adults. For all groups, a focus on tackling social isolation was important.

The project was split into two main activities.

- The first stage, community engagement from July 2024 – September 2024, involved 18 pop-up and focus group sessions and 230 respondents. Participants identified their dreams, barriers and interventions to support walking in Tower Hamlets.
- The second stage of the project ran from September 2024 – March 2025 and involved identifying and training Walk Leaders and Champions to develop their own walking groups. Six training sessions, including two bespoke training courses were delivered, alongside one-to-one support.

Walk Leaders and Champions displayed high engagement and commitment to developing the walking groups. Many connected their motivation to their lived experience of barriers to and benefits of walking. There is strong evidence of highly participatory process and responsiveness to Walk Leaders' and Champions' needs throughout.

The project involved:

- 27 volunteers and 389 volunteering hours.
- Eight walking groups formed.
- 41 walks took place, from over 80 walkers and over 299 attendances.

All target groups were represented within the attendee data and each had more than one walking group designed to meet their specific needs.

What was learnt about these barriers that can be applied to walking interventions more broadly?

Discussions about the opportunities and barriers to walking identified similar themes to consider in designing a walk intervention: accessibility for health conditions, the company and social concerns, leadership of the walk, environment and safety, access to amenities, individual motivation and purpose of joining, outreach and a fit with routine and wider life commitments. There were differences in emphasis and solutions across the three target groups. Good communication of specific information about the walks (such as difficulty and facilities) could alleviate some barriers; whilst a trusted intermediary could allay concerns.

Accessible walk design lies in the detail. This project tailored appropriate walks for people with a wide variety of high barriers to walking – from physical health concerns, to life pressures, lack of experience of walking for pleasure, and perceptions of high risk. Walk Leaders with lived experience and passion making careful, informed choices suitable for their group and having the tools to communicate these decisions were at the heart of this approach. This resulted in a set of walks which looked different to each other in their length, frequency, focus and timetabling despite being underpinned by the same training and support.

What is the impact of the project for participants?

The evaluation explored the building blocks which supported four groups of outcomes: connection and community participation; mental and physical health; leadership and confidence; and use of green space. Evidence of achievement of these outcomes are based on case studies and a small quantitative sample size from the longer-established groups, so should be understood as indicative.

	Building blocks identified	Emerging outcomes
Connection and community participation	Understanding, navigating and embracing difference Breaking patterns of isolation Linking opportunities for connection to time for self	All participants felt part of their local community. Most participants had made new friends (91%) and felt they had become more socially active (73%). Some participants were more aware of what was available in their community (55%).
Mental and physical health	Walking reliably improving mood Volunteers using their lived experience to design interventions Clear and supportive communication	All participants felt confident to try new things to support their health and wellbeing. Most participants reported improvements in their wellbeing (73%), feeling and motivation towards physical activity (73%) and walking undertaken in the last week (88%).

	Establishing routine	Some participants had moved to overall positive wellbeing from negative or neutral wellbeing (25%).
Leadership and confidence	Person-centred coaching support Mutual support and co-production in project structure A network and practice of learning Focus of leadership for a purpose	All participants felt confident in themselves. Most participants had progressed onto or were actively looking for further activities (64%). Some participants felt their self-esteem had improved through the project (55%).
Use of green space	Challenging perceptions of risk and possibility together Providing gradual exploration Providing novelty and trips	All participants had a regular habit of using and exploring green space. Most participants felt they spent more time in green space (83%).

Recommendations

- It is evident that walking is meaningful and beneficial to a range of groups who experience barriers to walking, including people unused to walking for exercise or pleasure. The primary recommendation of this evaluation is to ensure the walking offer in Tower Hamlets includes walks which have been designed with significant health conditions in mind, offering a staged entry to walking groups.

Further recommendations are divided into two groups: ways to learn from the participatory approach to this project; and opportunities to sustain and develop the activity and leadership engendered.

Recommendations to integrate participation across activities

- Integrate co-production cycles as additional improvement projects alongside and complementary to established groups and activities – this enables a continued service which can continuously take referrals generated at outreach, as well as capacity to absorb and sustain co-produced groups within the wider network of group support.
- Share information with wider audiences about the barriers, benefits and supports to walking in Tower Hamlets. This could include residents, local stakeholders who support the target groups within this project and council members.
- In future projects, prioritise learning developed with participants through programme mechanisms for peer support and feedback which are able to be responsive to change when suggested.

Recommendations to sustain and develop Walk Leadership suitable for the target groups identified

- Provide staff capacity or funding for administration, outreach and one-to-one support for group leads, plus an insurance offer for independent walking groups.
- Invest in Walk Leaders across Tower Hamlets through delivering regular bespoke Walk Leader training, with a train-the-trainer course. Embed practices of risk management and
- access to volunteer development across existing walking groups.
- Establish a Tower Hamlets wide forum for Walk Leaders to meet and exchange information. This could include pooled resources, a shared timetable and shared WhatsApp group.
- Continue communication practices around the details which groups with barriers to walking most require: difficulty, length, access to amenities, start and end points.