

“ Walking football has certainly given me a new lease of life”



Walking Football programme

End of programme report

Executive summary

Thank you to the Football Association and Sport England.

Over the past four years, you've helped us deliver the Age UK Walking Football Programme, helping older people get active and discover a new way to play the beautiful game.

“Thank you to the FA and Sport England for enabling us to build the Age UK Walking Football Programme, and provide a much-needed opportunity for older people to get involved with physical activity. We knew there was a need to get older people active, and this was only made more important than ever after the pandemic. Thanks to your support and generous funding, we've been able to reach nearly twice as many older people that we originally hoped, and have created a walking football legacy in communities across the country that will continue long beyond this programme.”

Alison Ingram,
Programme Director



“It is a highlight of the week for most of us, especially in recent times. Most of us are over 60 and for one hour we can forget about ailments and any cares or worries. We get fresh air, exercise, and laughter, as we all get along so well. The benefits are immense.”

Programme objectives

We're proud to have partnered with the Football Association and Sport England to deliver the Age UK Walking Football Programme.

United by our shared goal of making football accessible for all, we worked together to set up the Age UK Walking Football Programme, bringing the sport into the heart of local communities. We wanted to engage older people, particularly those from underrepresented communities, to increase physical activity and tackle social isolation.

Together, we aimed to:

- Set up 97 walking football groups.
- Reach more than 1,000 older people.
- Offer physical activities to older people, helping them to stay fit and well.
- Provide a space for older people to connect and interact, thereby helping to tackle loneliness and social isolation.

- Increase participation in walking football across England with a focus on targeting those from lower socio-economic groups, older people with long-term health conditions and groups that may be marginalised from society.
- Encourage sustainability of walking football groups to continue beyond this programme.

Thanks to combined funding of £634,133 from the FA and Sport England, we were able to set up a programme that went on to achieve this, and so much more.

Impact of COVID-19

We began developing our programme in January 2020, with a plan to start delivering walking football groups from March 2020.

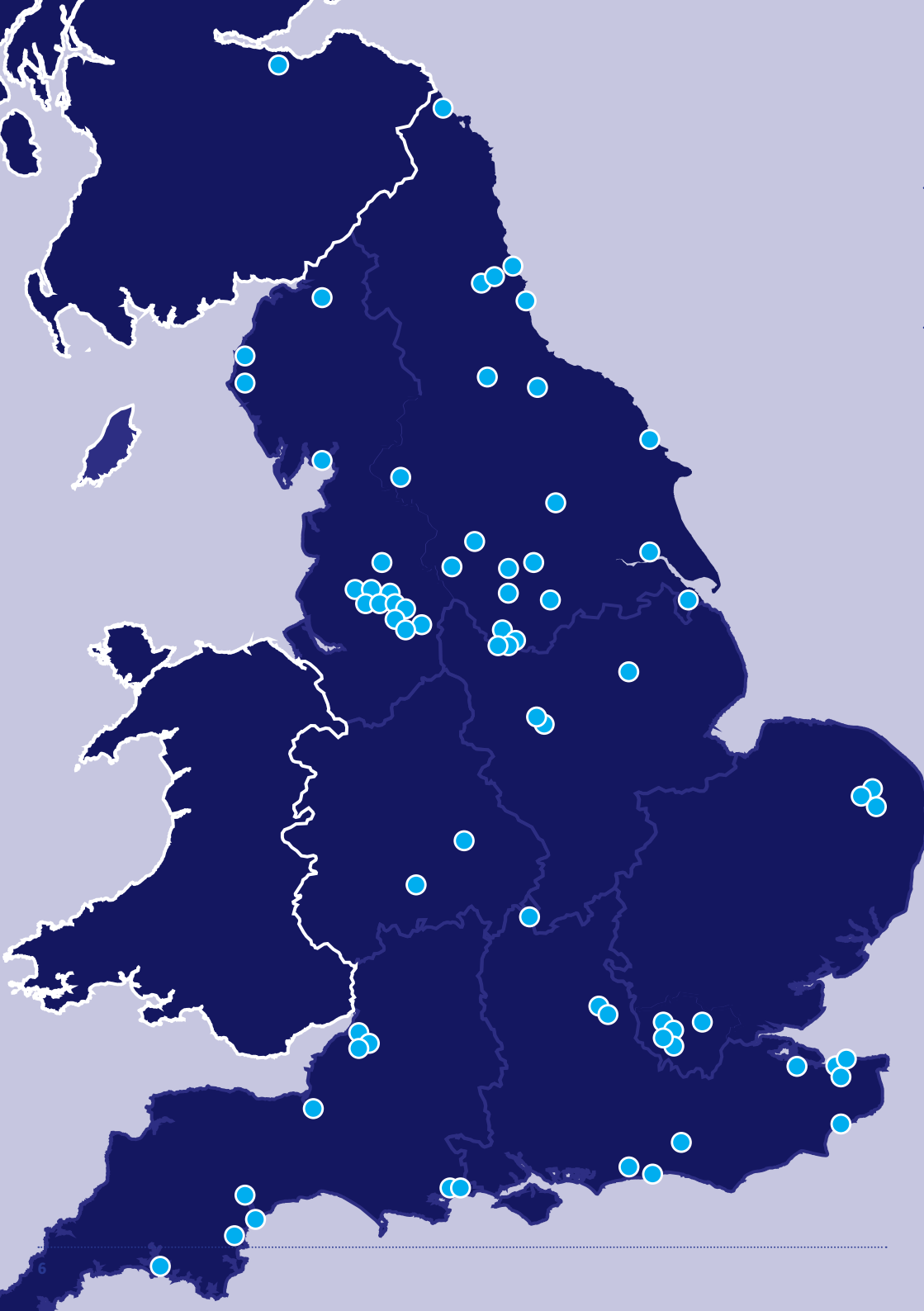
However, as the COVID-19 pandemic and resulting lockdowns came into force, we had to put delivery on hold.

We continued to work closely with the FA and Sport England to ensure the programme was ready to launch as soon as it was safe to do so. We knew our programme would be more important than ever to help older people get moving again after months of inactivity, as we saw the challenges

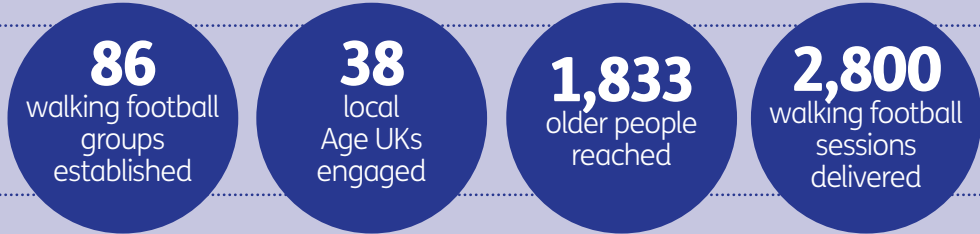
the pandemic created, especially for older people. Age UK research found that 45% of older people living with a long-term health condition were living with more physical pain since the start of the pandemic, and Sport England's research also highlighted that many people aged 55+ were missing socialising with others, but anxious about returning to group activities as restrictions eased.



“ [It has] 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.”



Programme overview



Each local Age UK tailored their walking football groups to the needs of older people in their communities, with some groups targeted at older people who may be more likely to be inactive or have fewer opportunities to access physical activity.

- **35 groups were set up for older people from lower socio-economic groups.**
- **11 groups were created for older people with long-term health conditions, such as dementia.**
- **13 groups aimed to specifically engage women with walking football.**



Local delivery

The various ways groups were delivered across the programme also helped local Age UKs to tailor to the needs of their participants:

Volunteers

Many groups relied on volunteers, with many continuing to deliver sessions now. One example of many is Jimmy at Age UK Stockport, who we've featured in previous reports, who started as a participant, and now runs three walking football sessions as a qualified coach.

Partnerships with local organisations

Many local Age UKs partnered with local organisations. From delivering groups, to providing coaching, expertise and access to facilities, these partnerships proved invaluable, with some continuing delivery beyond the programme funding. Examples of local partnerships include:

Local football clubs

- Age UK Kensington & Chelsea and the Chelsea Football Foundation
- Age UK North Yorkshire, Coast & Moors and Scarborough Athletic FC
- Age UK Buckinghamshire and Wycombe Wanderers FC

County FAs

- Age UK Devon and Devon FA
- Age UK Trafford with Manchester FA

Community Groups

- Age UK Salford and Foundation 92
- Age UK West Sussex, Brighton & Hove and Sussex FA and Brighton & Hove Albion's Community Trust
- Age UK Herefordshire & Worcestershire with Active Herefordshire & Worcestershire

Local Councils

- Age UK Wigan Borough and Wigan Borough Council

Sports venues

- Age UK Bolton with Bolton Arena
- Age UK Stockport and Life Leisure at Brinnington Park
- Age UK Hythe & Lyminge with Hythe Cricket Club

As part of the external evaluation of this programme, Sheffield Hallam University has further explored the

value of these local partnerships, as well as exploring how relationships within their communities helped local Age UKs reach older people and engage new audiences.

Levels of competition

Throughout the programme, there was a mixed appetite for competition – some participants simply wanted to take part recreationally, with a focus on the social aspect of the groups, whilst others wanted that extra level of competition.

For example, the women's group at Age UK Kensington & Chelsea took part in competitions run by Chelsea Football Foundation, the women's groups at Age UK Devon played in competitions run by their County FA, and the men's group at Age UK West Cumbria have gone on to compete in local leagues.

The difference in how groups developed showed the value of setting up groups reflecting the local communities and the needs of players.



“The project was a great success in bringing people together and increasing their physical activity. The fact that volunteers now run the sessions shows how important it was for them to ensure that they continue after the funding ... and we are proud to still be supporting them.”

**Project Lead,
Age UK Carlisle & Eden**

Programme highlights

The programme has had a significant impact on the lives of older people:



Physical activity levels

Cohorts 1 & 2:

Overall, participants increased their physical activity levels by one day per week of moderate intensity physical activity, showing that the programme has enabled behaviour change for older people throughout the programme. Furthermore, 85% self-reported an increase in physical activity levels in our participant survey.

Cohort 3:

The average activity level was 2.5 days per week for participants when first joining the programme. This increased to 3.1 days per week after 3 months and 3.5 days per week by the end of the programme – an average increase of 0.95 days throughout.

People living in areas of high deprivation

286
participants

Attendances

21,901

Gender split

26%
female
69%
male

Age of participants

45-85+

Impact on older people's lives

Beyond these statistics, older people have told us just what impact the Age UK Walking Football Programme has had on their lives.

In our participant survey of Cohorts 1 & 2 (318 respondents):

- **100%** said they would recommend walking football to a family member or friend
- **82%** said that it has improved their physical health
- **78%** said it improved their mental health and wellbeing
- **52%** stated that it made them feel more sociable
- **46%** stated that it sparked their interest in taking part in other sports.

The confidence and social connections gained by participants will last beyond the life of the funded project, improving health and wellbeing, and enabling older people to both take control of their own physical activity and to act as role models for other friends and neighbours.

In June 2022, the (then) MP for Loneliness, Nigel Huddleston visited Age UK Herefordshire & Worcestershire's group, and heard more from participants there about how they've seen both physical and mental wellbeing improve.



“It was great to see its inspiring work helping older people make new friends while having fun and getting exercise.”

Nigel Huddleston

External evaluation

We commissioned an external evaluation during Cohort 3 of the programme, delivered by Sheffield Hallam University.

From the results shared above, we know that the Age UK Walking Football Programme has had an impact on the lives of older people - improving physical activity levels, providing opportunities to get involved with walking football for older people who might otherwise not have access to sport, and the chance to socialise with others.

But to further understand how and why this programme has been a success, Sheffield Hallam University helped us to answer:

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 on 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?

Sheffield Hallam (SHU) produced a literature review, facilitated focus groups with 132 older people, and held interviews with local Age UKs and key partners. The Executive Summary and Full Report from SHU are available [here](#) to read in more detail.

Engaging the media and comms activity

Local outreach was tailored depending on the target groups and geographic areas, with promotion through various channels including:

- word-of-mouth
- promoting through other local Age UK activities
- WhatsApp and Facebook groups
- local radio and television
- template press releases
- template social media posts and infographics.
- support from other local Age UKs

Age UK also promoted the programme through various channels. Some highlights include:

- As part of Dementia Awareness Week, Dion Dublin joined Age UK Salford's walking football group for older people living with dementia, for a film featured on BBC Morning Live.
- We featured the programme in various Discover articles on the Age UK website, including [this feature](#) on the many wins of walking football.
- Our programme was named best sports and leisure programme at the Corporate Engagement Awards 2022 and shortlisted for the Consortium award at the Business Charity Awards 2022.
- We dedicated particular weeks to promoting the programme through Age UK's social media channels, collaborating and engaging with local Age UK, FA and Sport England channels.
- We used paid-for social media posts to support local Age UKs where uptake was low for some groups, which saw 222,000 impressions and a reach of more than 61,000 people.

Engaging women



This programme has had particular success in engaging women with a sport that predominantly attracts men. We promoted the programme on social media during the Women's Euros 2022 and Women's World Cup 2023.

Shortly after the Euros, TV star Denise Welch visited Age UK Wigan, taking



part in their women's walking football group and chatting to players about why they take part in the programme.

As a result of Denise's visit, the group's numbers almost doubled from 7 women each week to 13.

You can watch a video of Denise's visit [here](#)

Keira's Kingdom

Age UK Stockport's women's group joined forces with Keira's Kingdom, a group supporting people living with life-limiting or chronic illnesses – from Alzheimer's to cancer to anxiety and depression.

Together, they've created a walking football group that provides a safe space for local women who want to take their mind off their health issues and get active.

Many of the women have said that until they joined the Age UK Walking Football Programme, they'd struggled to find a group that was inclusive of their physical needs. But now they have a group that really looks out for each other – friendships have been formed, respite is provided, and sessions are tailored to what the groups needs each week. And what's more, there is "non-stop laughter".

Martha, 77

Age UK Kensington & Chelsea

Martha, 77, lives at home with her husband. Martha and her husband both have long-term health conditions, so care for each other. After moving to the UK 11 years ago, and speaking very little English, they have very few friends and family around to support them. Martha had become very lonely, and with little interest in her husband's passion for football, felt it was difficult to find like-minded people to talk to.

That is until she joined the Age UK Walking Football Programme at Age UK Kensington & Chelsea, where she found her voice. Having also joined their Spanish Speaker group, Martha felt supported by the friends she had made, to get involved and get active. The sessions have helped her to grow in confidence, and learn that she is capable of more than she thought, despite her physical difficulties.

In fact, Martha has become so good at walking football, the Chelsea FC coach that runs the group has described her as "their Messi".

Sustainability

We're incredibly proud that, as of November 2023, **69% of the groups established with this funding** will continue beyond the funding, either delivered solely by the local Age UK, in partnership with an external organisation, or through management of the group by a partner organisation.

Local Age UKs have reported a number of ways they've been able to ensure the sustainability of their walking football groups, including charging a small fee to participants; accessing other funding; utilising the kit and equipment obtained during the programme; developing the skills and experience gained by volunteers and staff; and learnings about the best ways to reach and engage with participants.

The external evaluation, along with the learnings of other local Age UKs, is also integral to supporting all local Age UKs to deliver further walking football and other physical activity opportunities. We shared the findings from the evaluation, our own learnings from the Programme, and those of the participating local Age UKs at an online event open to the whole Age UK Network on 13 December 2023.

Thank you to the Football Association and Sport England for their support for the Age UK Walking Football Programme. Together, we've been able to engage 1,833 older people in The Beautiful Game. We hope to see the legacy of this programme continue to inspire and motivate more older people to get active in later life.

“It has become the highlight of the week for me. I really look forward to the session. I am very thankful for the Age UK staff for organising and running the sessions.”



“ At my age, it was a pleasant surprise that I was able to play football again. Walking football made this possible”

Age UK

7th Floor

One America Square

17 Crosswall

London EC3N 2LB

ageuk.org.uk/walkingfootball

Email us: corporate@ageuk.org.uk

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