

Walking Publics / Walking Arts: Walking, Wellbeing and Community During Covid-19

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KEY INFO

Research question: How can creativity and the arts sustain, encourage, and more equitably support walking during and recovering from the pandemic?

Policy area or themes

- Arts & Health and Social Prescribing
- Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion
- Places and Communities

Methods: This brief draws on an online survey of the general public (1221 respondents) and a series of walking interviews. We also surveyed and interviewed artists who use walking in their practice and commissioned the creation of new works of walking art aimed at supporting a diverse range of people and organisations to demonstrate the potential of creative walking.

Geographical area UK-wide

Research stage: Completed

Summary of the research

The aim of our project was to explore the potential of the arts to sustain, encourage and more equitably support walking during and recovering from the pandemic. We wanted to understand the massive impact Covid-19 had on how, when and why people walked, particularly during lockdown, and within this, how creative approaches helped maintain walking activity. We also wanted to understand how artists used walking and share their expertise. Our definition of walking is inclusive of all kinds of bodies.

Our research foregrounds just how important walking was to many people during the pandemic, some even described it as lifesaving. Also revealed 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.

Policy recommendations

Our survey reinforces and supplements existing research on the personal, social and environmental benefits of walking. It extends this by focusing on creativity during walking. Walking and creativity can both be powerful tools for health and well-being and the benefits of each can be amplified by bringing them together.

There are three main barriers to involvement in creative walking and policy makers can help dismantle these:

Material Matters

A holistic approach must be taken to access which includes (but is not limited to) infrastructure such as adequate public toilet provision and resting places (e.g., benches). Any future pandemic response must be aware of the negative impact on many people if these facilities are closed. Statutory bodies must, as a minimum, consult with a diverse range of local Disabled people's organisations about developments in their area. Maintenance and protection, as well as increase of pedestrian routes, parks and green spaces is also vitally important. A safe walking environment is vital when it one of the few activities permitted.

Cultural changes

We must make sure nobody is excluded from walking due to prejudice or harassment. Support should be given to groups promoting and enabling walking with marginalised or oppressed communities. Policy makers must do more to tackle hate crime which limits people from civic participation.

Opportunities

Cultural venues, community organisations and individual artists should be supported to explore the potential walking has to strengthen their work, for example by widening access to participants, improving links to and with their locality, connecting local communities, and encouraging safe outdoor activity. Creative walking can be a powerful route to cultural participation and empowerment. Walking and health-based organisations should be supported to consider how they can embed creative activities into their work (e.g. social prescription, creative trails) as a way to support more diverse constituencies to access walking. The arts can act as a gateway to walking well.

Individuals experience pressure on their time and we want to make creative walking an appealing and welcoming choice. 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 individuals and organisations become more sustainable in the event of future lockdowns.

Key findings Our public survey demonstrated:

- Lockdown restrictions were the catalyst for some people to explore their local environment in new and creative ways which they felt were very positive.
- Simple interventions, such as pebble trails or window posters, helped create a sense of community and mitigated against isolation.
- Many people found walking a useful tool for their mental health and wellbeing, and this effect was enhanced through using creative methods alongside walking. Daily walking helped establish a beneficial routine when working from home.
- Nature, green space and encounters with wildlife provided solace and inspiration. Local parks played a vital role in communities. Families found creative walking a useful incentive to engage children.
- Some families found that walking together created a safe space for conversation with their children.
- Photography, and sharing walks online, helped individuals make sense of what was happening and strengthened connections with people they could not be with physically.
- There are many existing barriers to walking, including material factors (e.g. poor pavements, lack of public toilets), cultural factors (such as harassment and safety fears) and personal circumstances such as lack of time or opportunity. These barriers were often magnified during the pandemic

Further information www.walkcreate.gla.ac.uk

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