

Step Out Sheffield 2020-2021 Annual Report

Because of the global COVID19 pandemic, this report covers a year like no other. Everyone was affected. The UK Government announced a complete lockdown beginning on 23rd March 2020. From June 2020 Sheffield was either in partial lockdown or full lockdown. In other words, Sheffield was subject to Covid restrictions from 1st April 2020 to 31st March 2021, the period covered by this report.

A poll of members taken in April 2020 showed that 84% of Step Out Sheffield's 140 Volunteers were either over 70 years of age or fell into the clinically vulnerable category. In other words, the vast majority were at high risk of becoming seriously unwell if they contracted the virus. The Volunteers who administrate Step Out Sheffield took the decision not to re-launch walks officially until it was safe to do so. The upshot of this decision is that there were no official walks between 1st April 2020 and 31st March 2021.

This does not mean that Step Out Sheffield was inactive throughout the lockdown, far from it. We recognized through our previous programme of quarterly networking events for Volunteers and our monthly social events and occasional theatre trips, how important the socializing element of led group walking is to both Volunteers and walkers. It became apparent very soon after we first went into lockdown that some additional support to keep both our Volunteers and our walkers socialized would be valued.

Here are just some of the initiatives that took place over the year:

- The launch of our anticipated private Facebook Group for Volunteers and walkers was accelerated and went live in April 2020.
- Walk leaders and some walkers received regular 'can I do anything to help?' calls.
- Many walk leaders, in turn, regularly phoned one or more walkers from their walk.
- Regular news bulletins were emailed or posted to all walk leaders.
- An electronic Christmas Greeting was sent to all Volunteers with email.
- Electronic Birthday cards were sent to all Volunteers where the Birthday was known.
- A monthly quiz/fun night was provided for Volunteers.
- A weekly coffee-time Zoom session was set up for anyone (walker or Volunteer) who wanted to socialize with other walkers.

Although there were no official walks during the year, many of the Volunteers and walkers who were not required to shield continued to walk regularly. Across the city Volunteers and walkers were walking informally with friends they had met on their walk. In addition, some walk leaders worked together to organize socially distanced walks for some of their walkers. These walks were subject to social distancing rules and, because of the stop/start nature of the restrictions, involved a great deal of organization from the Volunteers involved.

An update on Walking for Health

In 2020 Ramblers confirmed that funding for Walking for Health will cease in September 2021. During the course of the year, they met with scheme representatives to discuss alternative ideas for carrying Walking for Health forward sustainably, and in December 2020 they announced their vision for the future. Walking for Health was established in the late 1990's and over the years it was funded by British Heart Foundation, Natural England, MacMillan Cancer Support and The

Postcode Lottery. These grant awards enabled local schemes like Step Out Sheffield to flourish and grow. The first Walking for Health walk in Sheffield began in 1999 and we have benefitted from the provision of training resources, and administrative support, including insurance for all our Volunteer Walk Leaders ever since.

The financial climate has, however, changed over the decades and the possibility of finding an investor with pockets big enough to fund Walking for Health has vanished. Ramblers, who have overseen Walking for Health since 2012, recognize the value of regular short, led walks in local parks and green spaces on physical, mental, and social wellbeing. They are very keen to support Health Walks when funding for Walking for Health runs out in September 2021. After consultation with local schemes, Ramblers, in conjunction with Walking for Health staff, made the decision to expand their walks portfolio to include Health Walks under the name of Ramblers Wellbeing Walks. From October 2021 Walking for Health staff will continue to provide local schemes like Step Out Sheffield with the same support as before but they will become Ramblers Wellbeing Walks staff.

A cornerstone of Walking for Health is that walks are free at the point of delivery and, to ensure the future of Health Walks going forward without asking all walkers to join the Ramblers, the administrative costs of Ramblers Wellbeing Walks will be shared between participating Health Walk schemes. For a scheme the size of Sheffield's, the cost they suggest amounts to approximately £1 per registered walker per year. and Step Out Sheffield is in the fortunate position of having sufficient funds to meet the annual subscription charge for the foreseeable future. Our walks will remain as they always have been (regular, local, up to one hour only, and accessible to all) but from September 2021 the National Umbrella organization will be Ramblers Wellbeing Walks.

Looking forward

The primary aim of Step Out Sheffield in 2021 is to re-establish walks at as many of our 28 weekly walking venues as soon as it is safe to do so once COVID19 lockdown restrictions are lifted. This will be done on a walk-by-walk basis and the anticipated timeframe is months rather than weeks.

A secondary aim of Step Out Sheffield is to work with Ramblers Wellbeing Walks staff to promote our walks to a wider demographic and to gradually introduce digital registration.

Step Out Sheffield has not simply survived a really challenging year, it has responded to the need for social connectivity by introducing new activities. Furthermore, while we have not been walking officially, many more people have 'discovered' walking and a whole new group of people (those experiencing long-term effects of COVID, known as 'Long Covid') has evolved with a need for gentle exercise like walking. It is possible that, thanks to the pandemic, we may see a big increase in new members once we are able to establish our walks again.

Sue Lee

Volunteer Walk Leader and Chair of Step out Sheffield