



Supporting Visually Impaired People

Green Walks Pilot Project Report



In collaboration with:



**OXFORDSHIRE
COUNTY COUNCIL**

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Co-Authors

Anita Lightstone – MyVision Oxfordshire

Louise Montgomery – Natural England

Anant Jani - University of Oxford

Stuart Cole – Oxfordshire County Council

Background

In 2023, Natural England with its partners (Research Institute for Disabled Consumers, Oxfordshire County Council, University of Oxford and MyVision Oxfordshire) published report JP050: “[Creating More Accessible Green & Blue Spaces: Understanding the experience of people with visual impairments that visit green and blue spaces](#)”. This report, based on an extensive survey, highlights the issues and barriers that prevent people with visual impairment from equitably accessing and benefitting from green and blue spaces. The report identifies the benefits of being able to engage with these areas, including improved levels of health and well-being and a reduction in social isolation. The report also brings attention to some of the barriers to walking in these spaces. These include lack of accessible information, lack of public transportation, difficulty in locating exits and entrances, uneven terrain, potholes, lack of facilities such as cafes and toilets, fear of getting lost as well as overhanging trees, bushes, and other obstacles.

Following the publication of this report, MyVision Oxfordshire, in conjunction with the report partners as listed above, undertook a county-wide project to investigate the use of walking groups to augment facilitators and overcome barriers identified in report JP050 as well as to gain feedback about the benefits of walking groups. This report covers the first stage of this initiative, which was a pilot project that included working with clients of MyVision to establish a walking group based in Didcot. The goal of the pilot was to assess whether the walking group could counter some of the barriers identified in report JP050 and to collect information on the benefits of doing this, including potential improvements in physical and mental well-being.

Project Objectives

The pilot project objectives were:

- 1) To engage with visually impaired people in the Didcot area to establish a walking group accessing local parks and recreation areas.
- 2) To co-design walking group activities with the pilot group participants.
- 3) To provide a written report based on the pilot project findings with associated linked recommendations to form the basis for development of walking groups across Oxfordshire as part of a wider study.
- 4) To utilise the walking group as a forum to discuss other areas of support and guidance related to the Natural England report recommendations such as access to blue spaces and ways to address safety concerns.

Expected Outcomes:

- 1) Formation of an active and sustainable walking group for visually impaired people in Didcot, Oxfordshire.
- 2) Develop a shared understanding and insights of the barriers and enablers that influence access to, engagement and connection with green spaces for visually impaired people.
- 3) Develop insights into best practice for engagement of visually impaired people to design and develop a local walking group and accessible green and blue spaces.
- 4) Collect indicative evidence as to whether walking group activities increase confidence in accessing green and blue spaces independently.
- 5) Collect indicative evidence that walking group activities improve mental and physical wellbeing and give an increased feeling of connectivity with nature.
- 6) Produce a project report summarising the project, processes and detailing findings from the walking group operation, co-design activities and pre-post survey/focus groups to inform Stage 2 involving a county-wide roll out.

Methods

Project management

The pilot project was led by the MyVision Oxfordshire Community Engagement Worker for the Didcot area. The project lead reported to the project board, consisting of the CEO of MyVison, the MyVision Services Manager and a MyVision Trustee. Routine monthly updates were submitted to the project board and supporting partners by the project lead. At the conclusion of the pilot project, the members of the Green Spaces Walking Group were asked to take part in a focus group (Appendix 1).

The pilot walking group was set up by the Community Engagement Worker, who has experience of running groups and lived experience of sight loss. All members of the walking group also met together regularly to socialise over a cup of coffee. At the conclusion of the pilot, and if the walking group participants wish to continue, ways of making the group self-sustaining would be explored.

Results

Setting up the walks

The walking group had a total of 8 members as well as the project lead and his support worker. On some occasions family members joined the walk, but the term 'number' refers to group members with visual impairments only and on average, 3 members took part in each walk (Table 1).

The lengths and locations of the walks gradually increased as the members of group gained confidence and fitness. In order to build confidence, the initial walks took place in the same location, Ladygrove Park. This venue was selected for its convenience. The group met and enjoyed a coffee together at a venue in the Didcot shopping area, which was known to all of them. After coffee, the group walked to the park. This was approximately half a mile, mainly along small urban roads. It also involved using a route where there were pedestrian crossings to enable

safe crossing of the roads. The park is extensive with areas of grasslands, forest and a small lake. The paths are mainly tarmac, making it easy for guide dogs and members of the group who use canes to identify the edges of the path. To begin with, members of the group were quite tired after the walk and welcomed the rest for refreshments. The first two walks followed similar routes through the park. Walks 3 and 4 were within Ladygrove Park, but gradually increasing in length and new routes around the park were being explored, with groups members suggesting these. In response and following a suggestion of a member, the venue for Walk 5 was Wallingford Castle, approximately a 20 minute bus ride away. The group leader researched this to ensure there was good public transport, refreshment venues and toilets. The Wallingford walk built the confidence and enjoyment of the members. Walk 6 took place at Ladygrove park and included the children of members because this walk took place during the Easter school holidays. The walking group members wished to continue with the walks after the project and extend the areas visited. This is happening on a regular basis, with groups members taking over leadership. One of the walks taking place shortly after the pilot was a visit to Newbury, again a bus ride away, where the group walked along the Kennet and Avon canal. The total route was over seven miles with the group stopping for lunch around the mid-point.

The main reasons for members not joining the walks were ill health, medical appointments, or family commitments. While poor weather was a reason for some dropout, many in the group attended even in poor weather because they knew other members would be attending and also because they made a commitment to the walks. There were a variety of reasons members mentioned for joining the walks, the most frequently cited ones being:

- Fresh air, feel good & good for your health, sun on your face, boost serotonin.
- Seaside, forest, garden centres, countryside.
- Transport, motivation, anxiety of new places overcome because they were part of a group and felt safer
- Accessible transport, confidence, having a guide, company.
- Better mental health, less isolated
- Desire to make pathways more accessible by, for example, making suggestions for improving signage on routes.
- Would like to walk round farms and animals, seaside, Wytham wood, Aston pottery, botanic gardens

Table 1: Walk Feedback

Walk	Attendees	Notes	Feedback
1	4	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- 3 members unable to attend because of adverse weather- Walk was preceded with a social session over a coffee in Didcot- Weather was heavy rain and also cold- Walk was held at Ladygrove Park and was kept short because it was the first snow- Walk route was through quiet suburban roads to a park- Walk ended with lunch in a pub, after which everyone was warm and relaxed although some members felt tired- Distance walked was around 1 mile	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Group enjoyed the company and chats amongst one another,- glad to get out and get some fresh air, felt tired after the walk.- Enjoyed the change of scenery, excited for the next one.- Good speed for walking, felt safe and pathway was flat and easy to walk on.- Toilets were accessible at the venue.
2	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Other members unable to walk due to illness	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Some of our members enjoyed the longer walk as

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Weather was a good temperature, no rain, windy - They found it a little more challenging and one member had to finish a little earlier. - We walked at a slower pace as this gave us the ability to walk as a group. - Members brought their dogs (pet dogs as well as guide dogs) to the group walk. It was agreed that this was helpful and generally a good idea. - The group did a longer walk this time round but in the same location as walk 1 	<p>they felt they were challenged by this.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Enjoyed being out in nature. - Had a lunch afterwards which was nice for the group as they got to socialise and bond with one another. - All in all it was an enjoyable walk.
3	4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Weather was cloudy and overcast but no rain - Walk duration and length similar to walk 2 but following a different route 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Enjoyed the walk as it took their mind off all the stresses at home at the moment. - A good chance to have some independence away from partner. Enjoyed having something to look

			<p>forward and change normal routine.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Glad to clear their head after a stressful half term with children.
4	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Weather: Blue skies and sun - Similar duration to walk 3 and same location but with a variation in the route 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - We had a member join us for our walk who was joining for the first time due to mental health reasons, she said it was lovely to get outside and walk with friends. - We were lucky with the weather as it was lovely and warm and made the walk very enjoyable, the members were very happy and enjoyed the route we did.
5	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Weather cloudy/sunny - A longer walk of approximately 4 miles - Completely new venue, which required public transport to reach - Research done in advance to identify toilets and refreshment possibilities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - We travelled to a different location for this walking group which involved getting a bus to the area. - This helped to gain confidence for some of the members who have not been on a bus for over 15 years. The group headed to Wallingford castle,

			<p>which again one of the members mentioned they tried looking for it before and could not find it. After the walk around the castle we headed for a lunch, before heading back on the bus.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Really enjoyed the walk and loved looking at the castle. - Gained confidence in using a bus. - Loved going to a new area in Oxfordshire. - One member of the group needed to take tablets before heading off, because of anxiety. - Nice to go with a group somewhere new.
6	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Weather: Sunny with a bit of clouds - For ease of walking with the addition of the children and other commitments, the walk returned to Ladygrove park using an alternative route 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Enjoyed the walk but found it tiring as not feeling fit; members bought their children because the walk took place during the school Easter holiday, and this was a good addition. - Weather was great for walking and the

		through the park that was longer in length	group were happy to be outside with one another. - Getting comfortable with the Ladygrove walk; however, they do worry they might get lost if walking off the path
7	3	Change of venue to Newbury, walking alongside a canal and including a lunch break. This was the longest walk undertaken with the route extending over 7 miles.	Joined by a MyVision member from Banbury and his wife in addition to group members and some of their partners. The change of location was enjoyed as well as meeting with a couple that they had not walked with before.

Feedback on the walks

Feedback was collected in two different ways – directly during/after the walks (Table 1) and more detailed reflections were captured through a focus group at the end of the pilot project held with the members (Appendix 1).

All members of the group reported that they had enjoyed the walks and felt that the walking group must continue. A summary of the key benefits identified after the walks included:

- Awareness of a set time and place to walk helped to overcome lethargy and encourage participation even in poor weather
- Walking in a group eliminated concerns about getting lost and personal safety
- A sense of increased physical and mental well-being
- It was good to walk independently of a partner or other assistant

- The group walks enabled different routes and venues to be explored
- Growth in self-confidence when getting out and about
- Meeting new people
- Enjoyment of the social side of the walk, including a use of a café
- Knowledge that toilets were available
- Sharing of tips and ideas to make everyday life easier

Some of the obstacles members identified as making the walks difficult included:

- lack of a clear path,
- the presence of steps, unless there was a hand-rail and the edge of each step was clearly marked,
- issues with access including poor public transport,
- the need for pedestrian crossings to enable easier and safer access to green and blue spaces
- the provision of good, working clean toilets
- the presence of touch-maps and provision of apps for green spaces
- the presence of a café beneficial from the refreshment point of view and also by acting as a navigation point.

During the focus group a set of four questions was asked (Appendix 1) and six broad themes emerged (Table 2).

Table 2. Themes that emerged during the focus group

Theme	Summary points
Social Benefits and Companionship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The group enjoyed the company and chats amongst one another - Members appreciated the social interaction and camaraderie - The walks provided an opportunity to bond with one another and make new friends
Physical and Mental Wellbeing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The walks improved mental wellbeing and reduced stress/ anxiety

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Members felt physically fitter and more relaxed - The walks helped to clear heads and provided a sense of independence - The group reported feeling more confident in walking in parks and other places - The walks provided a chance to engage with nature and appreciate it through sensory experiences
<p>Overcoming Barriers and Building Confidence</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The walks helped to overcome pre-conceived barriers and increase self-reliance - Members reported feeling more confident in navigating new areas and using public transport - The group dynamic helped to increase confidence in going outdoors - Members were motivated to continue walking and try new challenges - The group appreciated the opportunity to step out of their comfort zones and experience something different/new or to have a change in routine - Poor weather was regarded as a barrier but walking as a group enabled them to overcome the challenge
<p>Accessibility and Inclusivity</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The walks were accessible to all members, companions and children, including those with guide dogs - The group appreciated the variety of locations and activities - Members reported feeling more comfortable walking with peers who had visual impairments

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The group discussed the importance of accessibility features such as handrails and strips to mark the edge of steps - A slope was an easier way to engage with changes in the level of the ground compared to steps - The groups variety of visual impairments enabled navigation in confidence by supporting each other and utilising scent and unique features
<p>Future of the Walking Group</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The group was keen to continue the walks and explore new green and blue spaces, such as woods - Members proposed trying new activities and fundraising opportunities - The group discussed the importance of keeping the group small and organising social activities - Members were interested in linking up with other walking groups in different locations and inviting family members and others with different disabilities to join in
<p>Logistics and Organisation</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The group discussed the importance of organising walks and including a social rest point for refreshments and chatting - Members proposed using a WhatsApp group, or similar, to arrange walks and increase participation - The group appreciated the variety of locations and activities, but also recognised the importance of accessibility features - The group were interested in increasing the frequency to weekly - Members discussed the importance of considering the needs and preferences of

	all group members when organising walks and activities.
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In addition to the group expressing a strong desire that the walking group should keep going at the conclusion of the pilot project, they mentioned that they felt that they now had the ability and confidence to run the group independently, including increasing the activities and the areas where they walk, and using public transport. They felt that support from sighted people was not essential, because the causes of sight loss and the degree or type of sight loss varied within the group, meaning that between them, they had the ability to overcome most issues. A suggestion was put forward to establish a virtual online group to arrange walks and enable people to propose new venues, activities, dates and times, possibly increasing the frequency of the walks.

One member of the group reported:

“When I was diagnosed with sight loss, I was determined to face the challenges positively and to live as normal a life as possible. The biggest challenge has been negotiating the outside world, as it is full of obstacles and glare. Taking part in the green walks has helped boost my confidence no end. What better way to feel engaged in the world than walking and talking whilst enjoying being in the lovely company, surrounded by nature. Lunch afterwards is pretty lovely too!”

There was a recognition that sometimes pre-perceived barriers can be overcome when taking part in a group activity and this helps to build greater strength and self-reliance. These comments not only to walking and enjoying the countryside but also to other aspects of life, such as going on holiday. One member of the group reported:

“Moving here from another area, I lost confidence in public transport. Since joining the walking group and taking the bus to new areas I have gained more confidence. This has made me want to get a bus pass and travel locally.”

Another member said:

“Since my vision has deteriorated, I have lost confidence and fallen over a couple of times, however due to the support from charities and being a member of the walking group it has helped me to get back out there and

realise I can travel independently and I am even going on a solo holiday to another country.”

The group is also looking forward to linking up with other walking groups of visually impaired people and so enlarging the areas that they walk in and the activities undertaken. One suggestion was that this may enable them to initiate challenges and fund-raising activities. A mother in the group was joined by her son for one walk, which he enjoyed very much, so the inclusion of friends and family for some walks could be explored:

“For one of the walks, I brought my 8-year-old son along and he really enjoyed himself too. He was upset that he would be at school the next time I went.”

Conclusions

A regular walking group where all the members have sight-loss can increase accessibility of green and possibly blue spaces. Members identified increased physical and mental wellbeing along with a growth in self-confidence as some of the important benefits. In addition, despite meeting on a regular basis, they found walking together was a good way to exchange tips and ideas to help with getting out and about.

Through the walks and exposure to different environments, the members were also able to identify opportunities for design improvements to green and blue spaces to make them more accessible for people with visual impairments. For example, clearly marked paths and defined identification points, such as a tree with a seat by it or a pond, are very helpful with navigation.

Participants in the Green Spaces Walking Group pilot project all reported that walking with a group of other people with sight loss was helpful, beneficial and enjoyable. Over the period of the pilot, the confidence of the participants increased leading to a desire to take over and run the group themselves as well as extending its activities. This was reiterated during an informal conversation (August 2024), between Anita Lightstone and two members of the Didcot walking group.

Anita was told that the walks had enabled them to learn about and understand how vision impairment impacted each group member. It is well known that different causes of a vision impairment impact a person's

ability to see in different ways. For example, some people may have loss of peripheral vision, while for others the loss may be central or in specific areas of gaze. As the members started to understand each other's remaining visual capabilities, the group members coalesced to effectively create a 'collective vision' utilising the visual capacities of the individual members. For example, if there is one person that has difficulty in seeing steps, another walker that does not have difficulty in seeing steps can walk in front of them and can guide the first person safely up or down stairs.

Using this approach, individually and as a group, their confidence increased and they were able to walk in different and more complex routes. This has enabled the group to operate independently and built the confidence of the members.

The insights from this report highlight important ways that people with visual impairment can be enabled to connect with nature in walking groups to improve their physical, mental and social health. The ambition of MyVision Oxfordshire is to use these insights to support nature walks for people with visual impairment across Oxfordshire and develop guidance to support other organisations.

Appendix 1:

Focus group feedback

Date: 14/05/24

Following the completion of the final walk of the Green Space Walking Group pilot, a focus group was held to gain feedback from the walk participants. Those members of the pilot group unable to take part in the focus group, were invited to submit written feedback.

Four members of the pilot group joined the focus group and written feedback was submitted by a member unable to attend, along with verbal input from a member who was on holiday.

The discussion of the focus group was based around the following questions:

1. How would you describe your overall experience of taking part in the walk? What aspects of the walks did you enjoy most? Enjoy least.

The participants felt that it was good to get out in the fresh air and the social interaction. They reported that they liked comradeship of walking with peers, i.e. other people with sight loss. In addition, because of the variety of sight issues within the group, navigation of the walk, including route finding and avoidance of obstacles was easier. They all felt that they had gained confidence through regular group walking.

2. Did you find anything challenging/ difficult during the walk? What would make it easier?

They agreed that the weather could be a barrier to participation, but walking as a group gave the motivation to go out anyway.

Stairs or steps could also be difficult to negotiate, and a handrail was needed to help use these safely, as well as strips to mark the edge of each step. A slope was an easier way to engage with changes in the level of the ground.

Other challenges related to concerns about falling or tripping and being part of a group helped to reduce these, as well as opening up new opportunities. In addition, it was easier to navigate in a park, partly due to the presence of paths and also landmarks, such as different scents or presence of specific areas such as a pond or another unique feature.

It was agreed that they felt more nervous if they were walking alone, especially in a new location and safety was a concern. Guide Dog owners generally only walked on their own in areas which the dog had been taught how to navigate. Everyone agreed that if they walked on their own, they would only do so following a set and known route, so very much limiting where a walk was possible.

3. Have the walks had any impact on your daily life, such as mental and physical well-being, for example do you feel physically fitter? Do you feel more confident in walking in parks and other places?

The benefits of walking as a group meant that they walked even when the weather was not clement and the independence of walking without their partner. Following the walks, general reports included feeling fitter and

more relaxed. The walks sometimes took a walker out of their comfort zone, which was made easier by the positive attitudes of the group leads. It was reported by the group that pre-conceived barriers to doing things could be overcome and doing this enabled a person to become more self-reliant.

One member of the group reported that: “before the walks, I had not used a bus for 15 years. I realise that I had erected this barrier. I have now booked myself holiday to Austria”.

Through walking with the group, they had met new people and enjoyed it when people from outside of the group joined in with them. In addition, discussion during the walks had facilitated sharing of tips on all sorts of aspects of daily life.

4. Ideas and thoughts for the future of the walking group:

Everyone was keen to keep the group going. For future walks, people wanted to try a wider variety of locations, using transport where this was needed, and also to sometimes engage with another activity while walking. It was proposed that group walking could be used to explore more challenging venues, such as woods. It was also felt that the walks may present an opportunity for fundraising, even a sponsored walk or a challenge between groups.

To date, the walks had often ended in a social event, such as taking a meal together and everyone enjoyed this and was keen to continue it. However, in regard to the size of the group, it was felt that keeping the group small made it easier to organise the walks and related social activities and they would like to collaborate with other groups to extend this aspect.

The pilot walks had taken place on a fortnightly basis; the majority of the group would prefer to walk on a weekly basis. They acknowledged that not all members of the group can join every walk due to other obligations, holidays or ill health. In addition, it was proposed that it would be interesting to link up to other nearby MyVision walking groups, as and when they are established, to increase walks in a different area and to engage with more people who have visual impairment, as well as inviting family members and welcoming others with different disabilities to join in.

There was great interest in setting up a WhatsApp group or similar to make it easier to arrange walks, with the possibility if a member of the group wished to walk on a specific day or in a specific place, they could see who else might be interested through the use of the WhatsApp group.

About MyVision Oxfordshire

Navigating a world designed by sighted people is not easy when you have a visual impairment. MyVision Oxfordshire provides blind and visually impaired people across the county with services, support, tools, and skills they need to increase their independence and improve their wellbeing.

Registered Charity No: 1140556

Registered Company No: 07465300

Website: www.MyVision.org.uk

Email: info@MyVision.org.uk

Tel: 01865 725595

Office: Bradbury Lodge, Gordon Woodward Way, Oxford, OX1 4XL