



**Age &
Opportunity**

Incorporating **Age & Opportunity active**,
The National Sport and Physical Activity Programme
for Older People



Reaching Out to Older Men

Evaluation of Walking Football Initiative March 2022 – July 2023

Peter Mac Nulty, Lead Walking Football Coach
August 2023



**Age &
Opportunity**

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Age & Opportunity

We are Age & Opportunity, the national organisation that provides a range of opportunities for older people who want to get more involved in arts and culture, sport and physical activity, civic engagement, and personal development.

Our aim is to inspire people aged 50+ to live a dynamic life in which they are more active, more visible, more creative, and more connected.

One of our key priorities is to truly understand what ageing in Ireland means for people today by increasing the dialogue we have with them – conducting regular research through focus groups and workshops and by generating more opportunities for their feedback across all of our programmes.

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Summary of Findings and Recommendations

Background

- Walking football is a bespoke non-contact sport created for older persons. It has simple rules designed with health and safety as the paramount consideration.
- The sport is growing in popularity. Walking football is now played in over 60 countries. There are currently an estimated 200,000 individuals playing walking football in England.
- Walking football offers significant benefits in terms of physical and mental health for older men. As a team-based activity the sport also plays an important role in facilitating social interaction.
- The format and approach adopted in the delivery of the WFootball Initiative, with the emphasis of fun but in a safe environment, has provided reassurance to participants and partners alike.
- 16 men's groups, comprising men's sheds and football clubs, participated in the Age & Opportunity Walking Football Initiative over the period March 2022 to June 2023.
- Participants were confined to 3 counties – Dublin, Wicklow, and Kildare.
- A total of 134 individuals participated. The average age of participants was 69 years.

Key Findings

- The Walking Football Initiative contributed to an increase in physical activity amongst participants with the average number of days physical activity taken increasing from 3.05 days before to participation in the initiative to 3.71 days immediately after.
- Over half of men's sheds members who had participated in the initiative indicated that walking football had been instrumental in encouraging them to return to their sheds following the Covid-19 pandemic.
- Physical activity is the aspect of walking football most enjoyed by individuals who had participated in the initiative. The social aspects of the activity also represent a major part of its appeal for older men.
- Very high levels of endorsement were recorded amongst those who had participated in the Walking Football Initiative. 100% of participants surveyed indicated they would like to take part again in the initiative if given the opportunity to do so.

- Reflecting the very strong desire for social engagement, participants expressed a preference for a format that combines games within their own shed/club and fixtures or blitzes with other groups.
- Age & Opportunity's partners Irish Men's Shed Association (IMSA), Football Association of Ireland (FAI) and Dun Laoghaire Rathdown Sports Partnership also acknowledge the value of walking football. The walking football initiative fits strategically with partner programmes.
- With Ireland's population ageing and a significant increase in the number of individuals aged 60 years or older, there will be a growing requirement for active age programmes for older individuals, particularly older men.

Age & Opportunity Active Programme has attracted considerably higher levels of engagement from women compared to men. 90% of Physical Activity Leaders (PALs) are women. There is a consensus amongst participants, coaches and partners that the sport of walking football can play an important role in reaching out and encouraging older men to become more active and more connected.

Recommendations

With the experience of successfully implementing the Walking Football Initiative over the past 16 months in Leinster, and with relationships now in place with key partners the FAI and IMSA, Age & Opportunity is strategically positioned to bring the initiative to the next level. The following interventions and refinements are recommended:

- Age & Opportunity should expand the Walking Football Initiative as a **national initiative** open to older men across Ireland.
- The initiative should continue to prioritise **men's sheds** and older members of **football clubs** as the main targets for delivery.
- In addition to existing partners IMSA and FAI, Age & Opportunity should capitalise on already existing relationships with all **Local Sports Partnerships (LSPs) to help further promote walking football**. LSPs are very well positioned to assist in identifying and recruiting men's groups at a local level.
- The current delivery format (based on 5 sessions) works very well. Post session tea and coffee should always be encouraged as a standard feature to facilitate **social engagement**.
- Provision of equipment to participating men's groups, ongoing communication with previous participants, blitzes, and referee training should be continued as **core measures to promote the sustainability** of walking football.
- New measures recommended include **demonstrations** of walking football at League of Ireland matches, an international fixture against England Over 70's, and 'Train the Trainer' courses.
- Age & Opportunity should seek additional resources to facilitate the delivery of the next phase of the Walking Football Initiative. This should include **programme coordination and facilitation** and the **recruitment of additional coaches** particularly in Munster, Connacht, and Ulster.

- In order to maximise response rates, Age & Opportunity should consult with each group about the best way to **gather data** required by Sport Ireland 3 months after the initiative is completed.
- Age & Opportunity should consider a **review of insurance requirements** for partners.

1. Introduction

1.1 Introduction

This evaluation report has been prepared by Peter Mac Nulty, lead walking football coach on behalf of Age & Opportunity. This report sets out details of the activities involved in the Age & Opportunity Walking Football Initiative and an assessment of the initiative in terms of reach, effectiveness, and other criteria. The Age & Opportunity Walking Football Initiative has been implemented over a 16-month timeframe in Dublin and Leinster from March 2022 to June 2023. Outline recommendations for the enhancement of the initiative and for its extension on a national basis are also contained within the report.

1.2 Background

In September 2020 Age & Opportunity carried out research with older people's groups. This report 'Locked In, Locked Out, Locked Up' found that the impact of restrictions arising from the Covid-19 pandemic had been overwhelmingly negative for very many groups who were engaged in a lot less or no group physical activity. The Covid-19 pandemic had a devastating effect on the physical activity levels of older adult groups particularly amongst men's groups. Members of Men's Sheds reported the difficulty they had in maintaining contact with other shed members and many were reluctant to return to normal shed activities, including physical activities.

The 'Locked In, Locked Out, Locked Up' report recommended increased opportunities and supports for groups and individuals to re-engage in physical activity. Recommendations that have particular relevance to this Walking Football Initiative are as follows:

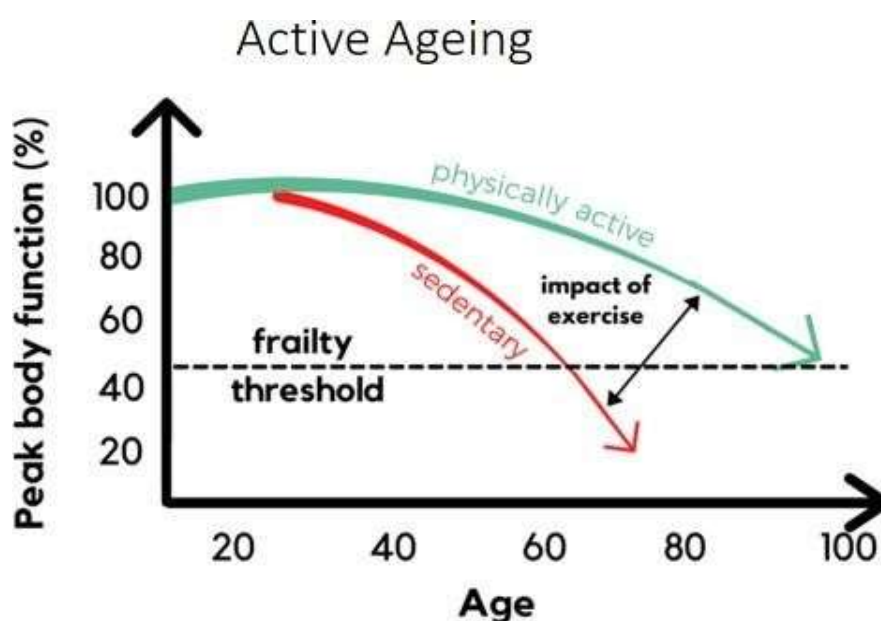
- Particular attention and support should be focused on men's groups.
- Walking is acknowledged as the main form of physical activity.
- Age & Opportunity should explore the potential to deliver other outdoor activities and innovative initiatives to deliver physical activity to target groups.
- A multi-agency initiative is required to help revitalise group activity and to enable groups to meet in a safe environment.

This Walking Football Initiative was developed and implemented in response to the above recommendations, ongoing evidence of the benefits of walking football in the United Kingdom (where the sport is now well established), and the very positive outcome to the Pilot Walking Football initiative with Naas Men's Shed in September 2021.

1.3 Walking Football

Walking football is a bespoke non-contact sport created for older people. Generally, activity levels decrease with age. The longer individuals can remain active, the longer they will stay independent. The graph below shows the impact of physical activity in extending the 'frailty threshold'. Walking football can play a key role in facilitating more active lifestyles amongst older individuals.

Figure 1 – Impact of Physical Activity



Source: Vee-Uye, UK

Walking football has simple rules designed with health and safety as the paramount consideration. Tackling is only allowed with no contact and the ball must never go above head height. Walking football is played on small pitches with small goals and 5, 6 or even 7-a-side teams. The game can also be played indoors on 3G/4G artificial grass pitches or natural grass.

The sport is growing in popularity. Walking football is now played in over 60 countries with 20 nations taking part in the Federation of International Football Associations (FIWFA) Nations Cup. In England there are now an estimated 200,000 individuals playing walking football in England, according to Sport England. In 2022, 350 teams entered the English National Cup with participants catered for in 4 age categories: Over 50s, 60s, 65s, and 70s.

In Ireland, with the assistance of its football development officers, the FAI has identified approximately 45 groups playing walking football in the country.

Taking into consideration the men's sheds and football clubs that have participated in the Age & Opportunity Walking Football Initiative since March 2022, and allowing for some

duplication, an estimate of approximately 60 groups and 600-750 individuals currently engaged in the activity is not unrealistic.

1.4 The Benefits of Walking Football

The sport offers significant benefits which can be grouped under three headings:

- **Physical Health Benefits.** Walking football is an excellent way of staying physically fit and healthy. It can produce high aerobic activity and can help reduce the risk of cardiovascular disease, strokes, and type 2 diabetes.
- **Mental Health Benefits.** There are many psychological and mental health advantages to playing Walking Football. Participants experience high levels of personal reward and satisfaction. As the physical benefits of the sport are felt whilst 'having fun', participants are more likely to exercise rather than seeing it as a chore.
- **Social Benefits.** Walking Football gives older individuals, very often an isolated section of the community, the chance to become involved in something they really enjoy, get re-acquainted with old friends and make new friends, and generally increase their own quality of life.

In November and December 2022, the Walking Football Association of the UK (WFA) carried out a survey of walking football participants. The main headlines from the survey were as follows:

- Over 50% of respondents are between 60 and 70 years.
- Over 70% play for the social interaction.
- Over 50% of people have been playing more than 4 years.
- Over 85% of players want to play in tournaments.
- Over 90% are comfortable playing in mixed gender games.
- Over 70% of clubs are running sessions twice a week or more.

In the same survey, participants were asked the reasons why they play walking football. 89% responded that they loved football/team sports; 71% cited social interaction as their primary motivator while 53% engaged in the activity to get fit. It is clear from these results and similar feedback from participants in the Age & Opportunity Walking Football Initiative outlined later in this report that walking football brings significant 'added value' beyond the physical benefits.

The following verbatim comments were recorded in the WFA Player and Club Survey and are consistent with the sentiments expressed by individuals who have participated in the Age & Opportunity Walking Football Initiative:

"Social interactions, laughing which is great for my mental health. The football of course and going for a cup of tea afterward."

“Continuing to play competitively the game I love, in the company of friends and teammates, and a new social environment.”

“Fun, laughter, and competition, then the social side while keeping motivated and active.”

“It offers the chance to keep playing an enjoyable and competitive sport together with the opportunity to interact with like-minded people.”

“I’ve never played football so I’m enjoying learning walking football, I enjoy the social side of it very much. I also enjoy the exercise I get.”

“The whole package. Being able to play a sport I have always loved, and thought was behind me. The social interaction and banter and many new friends I’ve made.”

“Exercise, new friendships, still enjoying a competitive atmosphere in my late 60’s. Who would have thought?”

1.5 Pilot Walking Football Initiative – Naas Men’s Shed

In early June 2021, Naas Men’s Shed contacted Age & Opportunity to express interest in walking football and also seeking assistance on how to get started in the sport. Age & Opportunity agreed to provide funding for a Walking Football Pilot Initiative with the members of Naas Men’s Shed. The initiative, which comprised four one-hour sessions over the month of September 2021, was delivered at Naas Sports Centre by Peter Mac Nulty on behalf of Age & Opportunity.

In overall terms, the Walking Football Pilot Initiative was a success and fulfilled a number of its key objectives and deliverables in terms of:

- Introducing the members of Naas Men’s Shed to the activity of walking football.
- Establishing walking football on a self-sustaining basis in Naas.

Serving as a blueprint for a possible roll-out of walking football at other men’s sheds elsewhere in Ireland.

Almost 2 years after the delivery of the Pilot Walking Football initiative, the members of Naas Men’s Shed remain fully engaged with the sport of walking football with sessions taking place on Friday mornings. Naas ‘shedders’ are also regular participants in walking football blitz events.

1.6 Walking Football Initiative – Project Goals and Objectives

In working to enable the best possible quality of life of older people in Ireland, Age & Opportunity seeks to develop inclusive and engaging experiences which respond to the interests and needs of the diverse older population in the country.

Following the successful completion of the Walking Football Pilot Initiative and having regard to the high level of interest in football amongst men, Age & Opportunity developed a new initiative aimed at encouraging older men back to physical activity and sport through walking football. A grant application was made to the Sport Ireland Covid-19 Grant scheme and funding was secured for the delivery of the Walking Football Initiative to 16 men's sheds with the initial focus on Dublin and other counties within Leinster.

Age & Opportunity's overarching goal for the Walking Football Initiative is to get older people, and men in particular, back to physical activity and sport. The organisation is committed to reaching the goals of the National Physical Activity Plan and the National Sports Policy by putting in place initiatives that reach out to those underrepresented communities and offer opportunities to all to engage in sport and physical activity, particularly older people.

Through the initiative, Age & Opportunity aims to reach older men from men's sheds to increase their physical activity levels, their participation in sport, and social engagement. Specific objectives for the Walking Football Initiative are as follows:

- To promote sport and physical activity to men
- To engage older men in sport and physical activity
- To promote resilience and self-development amongst men
- To coach older men in walking football and how to play walking football.
- To organise a Train the Trainer course
- To implement measures to aid the sustainability of walking football following the initiative.



Loughlinstown, Ballybrack, Shanganagh (LBS) Men's Shed

A partnership approach to the implementation of the Walking Football initiative was envisaged. The roles and responsibilities of partners and key stakeholders were identified as follows:

Figure 2 - Walking Football Initiative – Partner/Stakeholder Roles & Responsibilities

Partner Name	Role/Responsibility
Irish Men's Sheds Association	To aid with recruitment of participants, to promote and support and aid with sustainability following the project
FAI	To support by providing volunteers and promoting the initiative
LSPs	To support and promote the initiative and assist with sustainability going forward
Local Football clubs	To support and promote the initiative within local communities and with sustainability going forward
Age & Opportunity's Engage Programme	To deliver a resilience and self-development course to members of 16 men's sheds

1.7 Acknowledgements

The author, together with Age & Opportunity, would like to acknowledge the support of key partners and stakeholders in the implementation of the Walking Football Initiative. In particular, the organisation acknowledges the contributions of Rebecca Mc Loughlin and Lorraine Conneely of the IMSA, Derek O'Neill and Simon Walsh of the FAI, and Kevina Malone of Dun Laoghaire Rathdown Sports Partnership. The contributions of Stuart Langworthy and Nigel Genner of the Walking Football Association UK have been important in ensuring that this initiative has been designed and delivered in accordance with best practice standards.

We would also like to acknowledge the role of the men's shed members and football club members who participated in the Walking Football Initiative. The positive attitude and cooperation of these participants has been a key ingredient in ensuring its overall success.

Our appreciation also to Tony Kinlan for the photographs which appear in the report.



Walking Football Blitz, Bray, 28th June 2023

2. Initiative Outline

2.1 Initiative Set-up

The set-up phase of the Walking Football Initiative took place in the early months of 2022 and comprised the following activities and tasks:

- Recruitment and training of walking football coaches
- Refinement of the Walking Football Initiative delivery format
- Identification of men's sheds and clubs as potential participants in the initiative

Details of the approach adopted in setting up the Walking Football Initiative are outlined below.

2.2 Recruitment and Training of Walking Football Coaches

4 walking football coaches were recruited by Age & Opportunity over the months of January and February 2022. All the coaches had varied backgrounds in football (soccer) and walking football. The coaches, who have each played an active role in the delivery of the Walking Football Initiative are:

- **Peter Mac Nulty** – Lead walking football coach. Co-developer of the Walking Football Initiative and founder of the Dublin Striders walking football club in 2016.
- **Stuart Langworthy** – Walking football coach / Initiative Advisor. Manager of the England over 60s walking football team.
- **Simon Turley** – Walking football coach. Walking football player and junior football coach.
- **Albert Sugg** – Walking football coach. Walking football player and UEFA 'A' coaching licence holder.

Contracts for all coaches were prepared by Age & Opportunity and lead walking football coach Peter Mac Nulty in February 2022.

Brian Dooney, facilitator from the Age & Opportunity Engage programme was responsible for the delivery of resilience sessions. In March 2023, Paul McCabe joined the coaching team. Paul is a professional fitness instructor and has been delivering Age & Opportunity Active initiatives to older people for over 15 years.

As a quality assurance exercise, a 'Train the Trainers' initiative was established. The initiative was led by Stuart Langworthy of the Walking Football Association and lead coach Peter Mac Nulty and was delivered over 2 sessions on February 17th (Online) and February 24th (at Inspire Leisure Centre, Cabra). Training focussed on the rules of walking football, coaching drills, health and safety guidelines. In addition to coaches Albert Sugg and Simon

Turley, this training initiative was also attended by Paul Gallier, Age & Opportunity Active Programme Assistant Manager.

2.3 Identification of Men's Sheds and Clubs as Potential Participants in the Walking Football Initiative

In the early stages of the Walking Football Initiative, the task of sourcing potential participants for the Walking Football Initiative was led by Age & Opportunity. As the initiative evolved through 2022 and 2023, other organisations played a supporting role in identifying men's groups. Support from partner organisations in helping build the initiative was provided on an informal/ad hoc basis. In summary, the participants in the Walking Football initiative were sourced from the following channels:

- **Age & Opportunity.** Building on existing contacts which had been established with men's groups and other key stakeholders, Age & Opportunity identified the first batch of men's sheds for the initiative. Following the initial identification process, outline information on walking football was furnished to 'interested' men's sheds. This was followed up by introductory visits to sheds undertaken by a lead walking football coach during which further information and personal experiences of the sport were shared. These introductory visits often proved instrumental in providing reassurance to nervous would-be participants.
- **'Come and Try' Days.** On 14th April 2022, Age & Opportunity organised a 'Come and Try Day'. The event was held at Inspire Leisure Centre, Cabra and was attended by 20 older men from five men's sheds. It included demonstrations of walking football technique followed by a mini blitz tournament. The emphasis was very much on FUN! A further 'Come and Try Day' took place in Naas on 16th June 2022. 30 individuals representing 6 sheds/clubs participated.
- **Irish Men's Shed Association.** A series of meetings was held with IMSA throughout 2022. The organisation had experienced difficulty with the uptake of its own programmes as a consequence of the slow return to the sheds by members following the COVID-19 pandemic. During the first half of 2022, the IMSA agreed to promote awareness of the Walking Football Initiative to members of the men's sheds although the IMSA's primary focus was on the delivery of the 'Sheds for Life' programme.

In the latter part of 2022, IMSA furnished Age & Opportunity with details of the men's sheds that had successfully completed their 'Sheds for Life' programme. The offer to shed members to participate in the Walking Football Initiative as a 'follow on' yielded dividends with a number of sheds signing up.

On 26th January 2023, lead walking football coach Peter Mac Nulty attended the IMSA Annual Awards and gave a presentation on the Walking Football Initiative. This platform generated further positive exposure and recruits for the initiative.

- **Football Association of Ireland.** Age & Opportunity has a long-established relationship with the FAI. The two organisations have collaborated in the sharing of materials, identification of groups and clubs currently involved in walking football, rules, publicity, and interviews. Cooperation on walking football has gathered pace in 2023 and 2 initiatives in particular will serve to support and grow walking football in Ireland.

The FAI has recently prepared a **Walking Football Resource in consultation with Age & Opportunity**. This is a ‘one stop shop’ information platform for walking football clubs, men’s sheds, current participants, and those interested in taking up the sport. The resource, which launched in July 2023 provides information on the benefits of walking football, the rules of walking football, health & safety guidelines, walking club contacts, and case studies.

In June 2023, Age & Opportunity and the FAI signed a **Memorandum of Understanding** to deliver a walking football initiative to older members and supporters of League of Ireland football clubs. Under this arrangement, walking football will be delivered as a community engagement initiative under the FAI’s “More than a Club” project which is assisting League of Ireland clubs to develop their community engagement capacity. Working with Football Social Responsibility (FSR) officers in each club, the Walking Football Initiative will initially be delivered at 5 League of Ireland clubs in 2023. The first session under the initiative took place with Finn Harps FC, Co Donegal, on Wednesday 5th July, 2023. The other League of Ireland clubs scheduled to participate in the initiative in 2023 are Wexford FC, Waterford FC, Bray Wanderers FC, and Cork City FC. Subject to funding, there is scope to extend the initiative to other League of Ireland clubs in 2024 and 2025 with other FSR officers in place.

- **Dun Laoghaire Rathdown Sports Partnership.** In the spring of 2023, Age & Opportunity collaborated with Dun Laoghaire Rathdown Sports Partnership (DLRSP) on an initiative to deliver walking football to men’s sheds in Dun Laoghaire Rathdown. DLRSP took a lead role in identifying potential sheds. The two organisations collaborated on the recruitment process. 4 men’s sheds expressed interest in participating: Ballinteer, Nutgrove, LBS (Loughlinstown, Ballybrack, Shanganagh), and Blackrock¹.

Due to the lower-than-average number of individuals from Ballinteer and Nutgrove Men’s Sheds wishing to participate, these two groups were combined with sessions delivered at DLR Leisure Meadowbrook. For the same reasons, members of LBS and Blackrock Men’s Sheds amalgamated with sessions taking place at DLR Leisure Monkstown. A newly formed men’s shed, Stillorgan, has expressed interest in participating in the Walking Football Initiative.

¹ *Blackrock Men’s Sheds had participated previously in the initiative in May/June 2022.*

2.4 Walking Football Delivery Format

The delivery format for the Walking Football Initiative was largely based on the format which had been successfully piloted with Naas Men's Shed in September 2021. The initiative comprises 5 one-hour sessions with each participating group.²

In the main, walking football sessions were delivered outdoors on all-weather 5-a-side pitches owned or managed by local authority/leisure centres or football clubs. All venues were vetted in advance by the lead walking football coach. In a minority of cases, sessions were delivered indoors in community centres or leisure centres. The consensus amongst the coaches and participants who had experienced both indoor and outdoor settings was that the latter format was more enjoyable and safer.

Each session comprised warm-up activities, walking technique, essential walking football demonstrations, and match scenarios. A similar format was adopted for each of the five sessions with more time allocated for matches in the fourth and fifth sessions.

Handouts and video demonstration clips on walking football were circulated to participants via WhatsApp in advance of the first session. Other materials included a 'Guide to Playing Walking Football' prepared by the Walking Football Association (UK) and Walking Football Rules which were formulated by the FAI in consultation with walking football clubs and groups in Ireland. The rules were further refined and circulated following the Referees Training Initiative [See 2.5 – Measures to Promote Sustainability].

Health and Safety Measures

The health and safety of walking football participants was given priority throughout all stages in the delivery of the Walking Football Initiative. In addition to the vetting of pitches and facilities, arrangements were made to ensure that selected venues had defibrillators in place. In advance of the first session with each group, all participants were asked to complete Age & Opportunity's standard Physical Activity form. Coaches also observed participants throughout sessions to ensure that they were physically capable of participating. As a general rule, with older groups [aged 70 + years], more breaks were taken during the sessions.

² The original format for the Pilot Walking Football Initiative was based on the delivery of 4 one-hour sessions. The number of sessions was extended to 5 to accommodate the inclusion of an adapted Changing Gears resilience session.

2.5 Measures to Promote Sustainability

A number of measures were taken to promote the sustainability of the Walking Football Initiative. A key objective was to encourage those men's sheds and football clubs which had participated in the initiative to continue their participation in the sport. These measures included the following:

- **Provision of Equipment.** After the fifth and final walking football session, all participants were presented with Age & Opportunity certificates of completion. Each group was also provided with an equipment pack containing 6 footballs, a set of 20 coloured bibs, and a whistle. (See Referee Training Course below).
- **Communication.** Most of the participating men's sheds and clubs had WhatsApp groups in place. The lead walking football coach used this platform to share video clips and other materials on walking football. WhatsApp and email were also used to share details of walking football events including blitzes and the referee training course.
- **Blitzes.** From the very outset of the initiative, groups participating in the Walking Football Initiative expressed interest in meeting with and playing the sport against other men's groups. This desire for social engagement with a competitive dimension is confirmed in the research undertaken with the men (See 3.2 Survey of Walking Football Participants). Three blitzes were organised over the course of the 15-month initiative timeframe. These blitzes were held in Cabra, Dublin (14th April 2022), Naas, County Kildare (16th June 2022) and Bray, County Wicklow (28th June 2023).
- The latter event was held exclusively for men's shed members and football clubs that had participated in the Walking Football Initiative. 70 men representing six groups participated in the blitz which was won by Blackrock Men's Shed.
- **Referee Training Course.** The rules of walking football have a number of significant differences to association football i.e., soccer. The most important of these concerns is the requirement for players to walk and not run and to avoid contact with opposing players.
- For the game to work, these rules need to be enforced otherwise games can very quickly degenerate into soccer with players running and tackling with obvious implications in terms of potential injuries and an overly competitive environment.
- Participating groups in the Walking Football Initiative were advised on the importance of ensuring that all games are refereed. Having regard to this aspect of the sport, Age & Opportunity organised a Referee Training Course. The course comprised an online module (on 22nd February 2023) and a full day pitch session (on 1st March 2023). 12 individuals attended the Referee Training Course.

3. Initiative Outcome

3.1 Participant Details

Excluding Naas Men's Shed which participated in the pilot Walking Football Initiative, a total of 134 individuals from 16 men's sheds or clubs participated in the Walking Football Initiative over the 16-month timeframe from early March 2022 to early June 2023. The first group to participate in the initiative were Plunkets Men's Shed with the initial session taking place in Cabra, Dublin on 9th March 2022.

All participants were from within the Leinster region including counties Dublin, Wicklow, and Kildare with members of 16 men's sheds participating. Supporters of two League of Ireland Football clubs, Bohemians FC, and Shamrock Rovers FC, also participated as did an informal group from Ballymun. Details of the participating groups are presented in Figure 3 below.

Figure 3 – Walking Football Initiative – Participant Details

Name of Participating group	Location at which sessions delivered	Session dates	Number of Participants*
Plunket's Men's Shed	Inspire Leisure Cabra	9th March- 6th April 2022	8
Blackrock Men's Shed	DLR Leisure Monkstown	24th May- 21st June 2022	7
Ballymun Group	Trinity Comprehensive School	11th August- 15th Sept. 2022	10
Clane Men's Shed	Clane United FC	31st August-28th Sept. 2022	10
Bohemians FC	Inspire Leisure Cabra	6th October- 10th Nov. 2022	8
Kilcoole Men's Shed	St Anthonys FC Kilcoole	26th October- 7th Dec. 2022	10
Airfield Men's Shed	Astro Park Coolock	25th October- 29th Nov. 2022	8
Tinahealy Men's Shed	Community Hall Tinahely	17th November- 15th Dec. 2022	6
Shamrock Rovers FC	Roadstone Group Sports Club	15th November- 13th Dec. 2022	14
Vale of Avoca Men's Shed	Community Hall Avoca	23rd November - 21st Dec. 2022	6
Donaghmede Men's Shed	Grange Woodbine FC	15th March - 12th April 2023	16
LBS*/Blackrock Men's Sheds	DLR Leisure Monkstown	28th March - 25th April	11
Balinteer/Nutgrove Men's Sheds	DLR Leisure Meadowbrook	30th March - 20th April 2023	8
Skellys/Beaumont Men's Sheds	Rockfield Park Artane	9th May - 6th June 2023	12
Total Participants			134

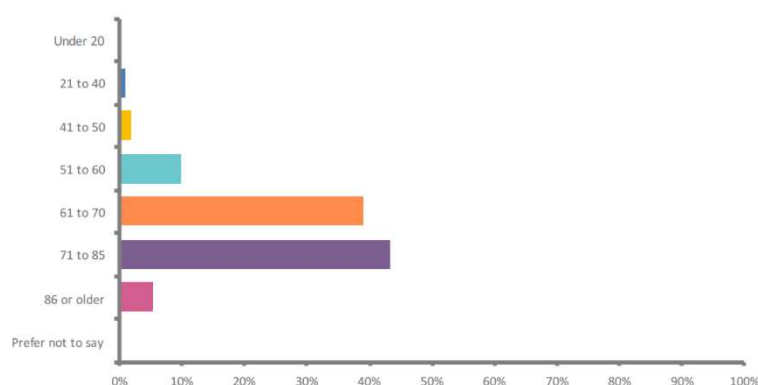
3.2 Survey of Walking Football Participants

Age

The age of individuals who participated in the Walking Football initiative ranged from 50 to 80 years. The average age of participants was 69 years. The above information has been derived from a survey of 113 individuals who participated in the Walking Football Initiative [See Appendix - Walking Football Initiative Participant Questionnaire].

Q2: What is your age?

Answered: 113 Skipped: 1

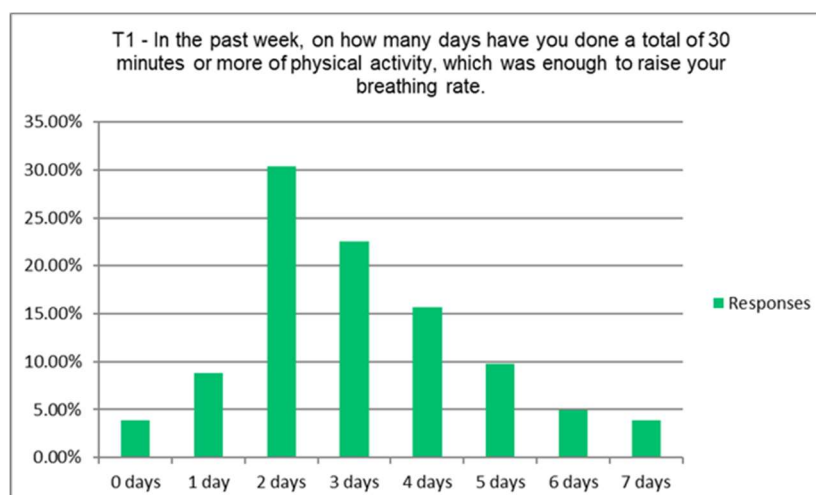


Participation in Physical Activity

The first measurement [T1] was taken in advance of participation in the initiative. The second measurement [T2] was taken on completion of the 5 walking football sessions. The final measurement [T3] was taken 3 months after participation in the Walking Football Initiative.

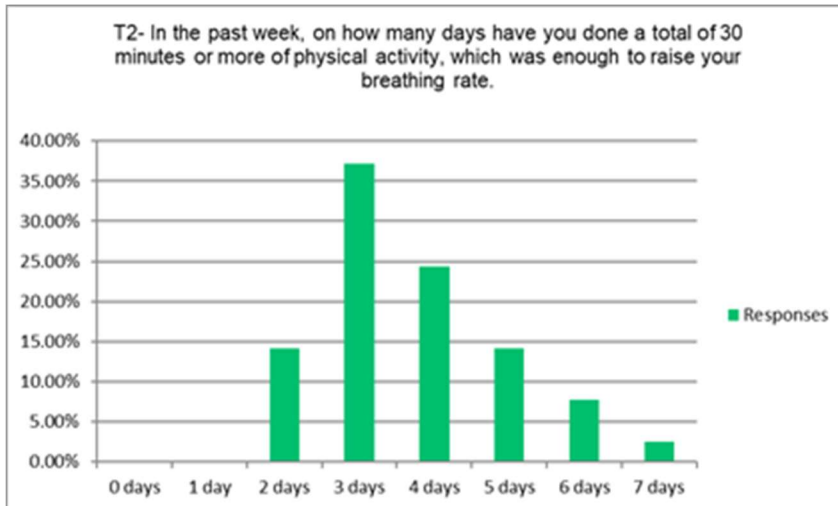
Prior to engaging in the walking football sessions, on average, participants engaged in 3.05 days of physical activity, as per the definition above. This average is based on responses from 102 individuals as presented in Figure 4 below.

Figure 4 – Participation in Physical Activity – Measurement 1 – Pre-Participation



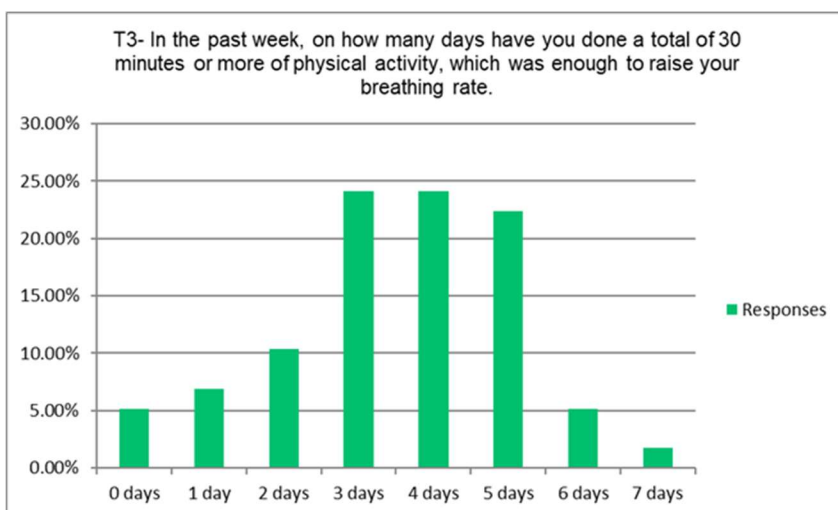
The Walking Football Initiative contributed to an increase in physical activity amongst participants with the average number of day's activity increasing to 3.71. This average is based on responses from 78 individuals as presented in Figure 5 below.

Figure 5 – Participation in Physical Activity – Measurement 2 – Post Participation



3 months after participation in the Walking Football Initiative, there is evidence to suggest that there was some fall-off in physical activity with the average number of day's activity decreasing to 2.79. Caution should be exercised in comparing this finding (presented in Figure 6 below) with the pre and post initiative measurements due to the reduced number of responses to this measurement [58]. This finding warrants further investigation.

Figure 6 – Participation in Physical Activity – Measurement 3 – 3 Months After Participation

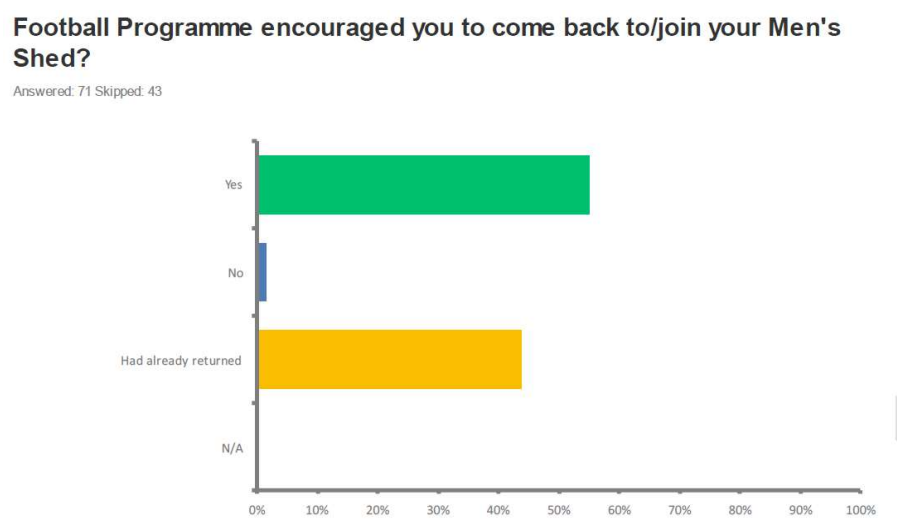


In addition to collecting demographic information and current levels of physical activity, the survey of walking football participants also obtained feedback on participant’s experiences and opinions of walking football. As can be seen from the survey responses presented below, the overwhelming consensus of participants was positive.

Role of Walking Football in Encouraging Return to Men’s Sheds

Over half of the men’s shed members who had participated in the survey indicated that the Walking Football Initiative had been instrumental in encouraging them to return to their respective sheds. [Note, the Shamrock Rovers FC and Bohemians FC groups were established specifically to participate in the Walking Football initiative, so this question did not apply to them].

Figure 7 – Role of Walking Football in Encouraging Return to Men’s Sheds



Aspects of Walking Football Most Enjoyed

The physical activity [mentioned by 29%] is the aspect of walking football most enjoyed by those individuals who had participated in the initiative. Respondents also enjoyed the friendly environment and social aspects of walking football.

Figure 8 – Aspects of Walking Football Most Enjoyed



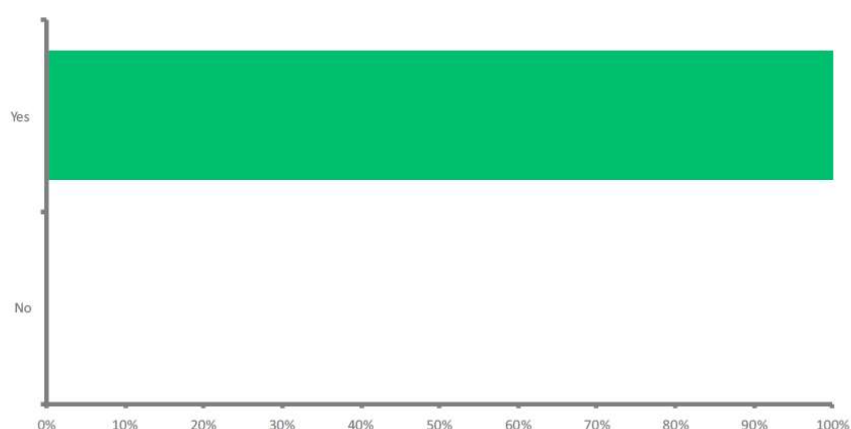
Interest in Participating in Walking Football Again

Consistent with the opinions of walking football participants in England, high levels of endorsement of walking football were recorded by those who had participated in the initiative. 100% of respondents indicated they would like to take part in the Walking Football Initiative again if given an opportunity to do so.

Figure 9– Interest in Participating in Walking Football Again

Q14: Would you take part in a Walking Football programme again?

Answered: 114 Skipped: 0



Similar proportions of respondents indicated they would be willing to recommend walking football to a friend (99%) and take part in walking football on a weekly basis.

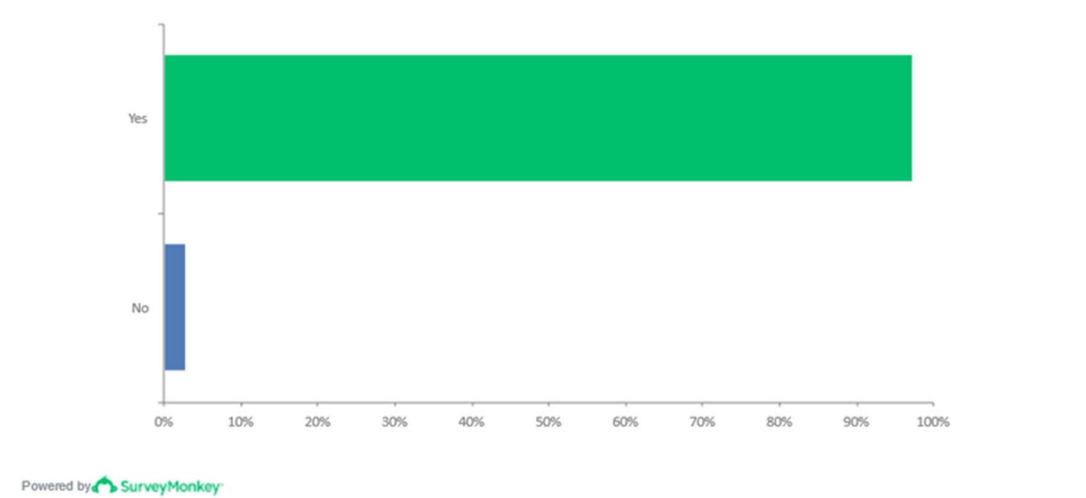
Preferred Environment for Playing Walking Football

The overwhelming majority (97%) of survey participants would like to take part in walking football style blitz style activities with other groups from the locality and/or nationally.³

Figure 10 – Interest in Participating in Walking Football Blitz Activities

Q16: Would you like to take part in Walking Football style blitz style activities with other groups from the locality and/or nationally?

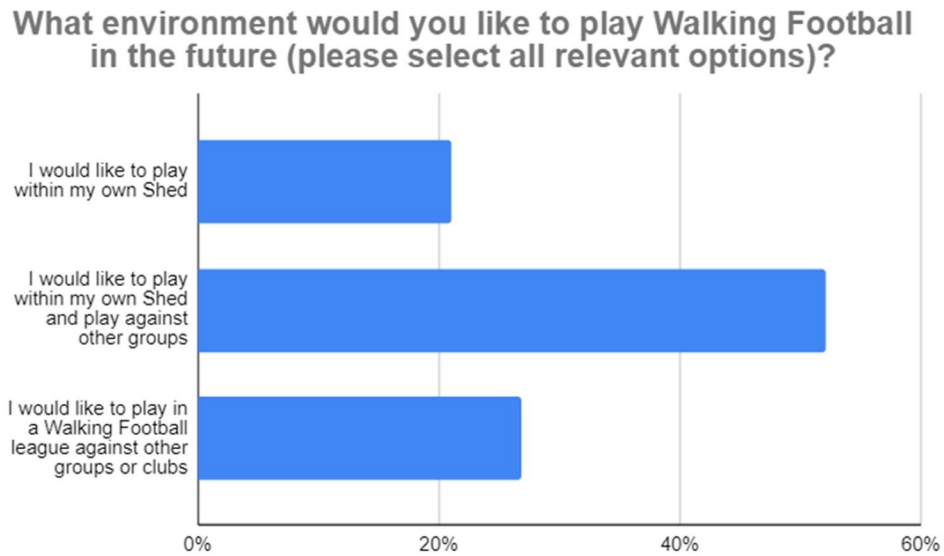
Answered: 109 Skipped: 5



In a follow up question, respondents were pressed on their preferred environment in which they would like to play walking football. As can be seen in the figure below, six in ten expressed a preference for an environment that combines (regular) games with their own shed/club and fixtures or blitzes with other group.

³ Based on the experience in organising the Age & Opportunity walking football blitz in Bray, County Wicklow on 28th July 2023, it was clear that some men's shed members are not willing to stray too far from their own localities.

Figure 11– Preferred Environment for Playing Walking Football



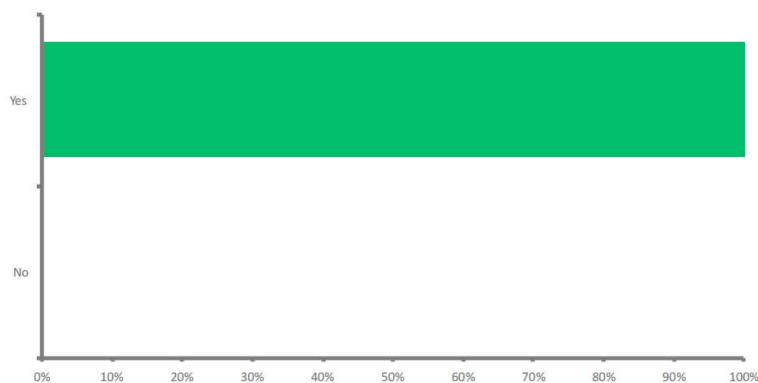
Rules

All respondents indicated the rules of walking football were clearly explained to them.

Figure 12– Explanation of Rules of Walking Football

Q19: Were the Walking Football rules explained clearly?

Answered: 111 Skipped: 3



An equally high proportion of respondents indicated the rules of walking football were easy to follow.

Resilience

Of those participants who took part in the adapted Changing Gears element of the initiative, 23% reported an increase in confidence to be able to cope with changes in their lives and to deal with potentially challenging times ahead. Of this cohort 20% also

reported an increase in confidence in their ability to maintain existing and/or develop new relationships and friendships that will satisfy their needs.

The following verbatim comments, which were made by participants in the Walking Football Initiative, are broadly representative of the majority of individuals involved:

"It was great fun. Very good for the mental health."

"Best fun we have had as a group for a long time."

"Great for meeting people."

"The walking football made me feel more confident."

"Thanks for a fantastic experience."

"Keep it going. Good for relationships with other sheds. Keep it competitive but friendly' [Following blitz]."

"Overall, I really enjoyed it."

"played [walking football] previously with another group. I got injured due to contact with another player. The rules were not applied. This is safer."



Walking Football Blitz, Bray, 28th June 2023

3.3 Partner & Key Stakeholder Observations

As previously outlined, Age & Opportunity was able to draw on the support of a number of partners and key stakeholders in the establishment and implementation of the Walking Football initiative. In this regard, the input of the IMSA, the FAI, and Dun Laoghaire Rathdown Sports Partnership were important.

As part of the evaluation process, consultations were held with these partners in June 2023 with a view to obtaining feedback on the Walking Football Initiative to date and suggestions on how the initiative can be developed into the future. The findings from these consultations are presented below:

Football Association of Ireland (FAI) – Consultation with Simon Walsh, Programme Coordinator, Futsal and Recreation Football, 21st June, 2023.

Key points emerging from the consultation were as follows:

- There is great 'value' in walking football. As the latest census has indicated, there has been a significant increase in the population aged 60 years and older. There will be a greater emphasis on positive exercises and a growing requirement for active age programmes for older individuals.
- Anyone who plays walking football really enjoys it. It can be played by individuals aged 40 years and older.
- In terms of future growth of walking football, this can best be done through football clubs (both senior and junior clubs). Clubs have people with football knowledge, facilities and equipment, and established communications channels. Walking football is a really good way for clubs to integrate with older individuals including former members and older members of the community.
- The FAI has an initiative, the Clubmark Programme, designed to promote best practice governance in football clubs. The 2* Clubmark Programme is currently in the process of being piloted. In order to obtain accreditation, walking football is likely to be one of the programmes that football clubs will be required to deliver.
- Football Social Responsibility (FSR) officers have recently been appointed at 5 League of Ireland football clubs. The objective will be for all 20 League of Ireland clubs to have FSR officers in place over the coming years. The appointment of FSR officers, which has been co-funded by the clubs and Healthy Ireland, will serve to strengthen partnerships with local communities. Walking Football can deliver in helping football clubs build sustainable environments.
- Going forward, the relationship between the FAI and Age & Opportunity is likely to be in the FSR space.

In summary, the huge amount of good work done by Age & Opportunity on walking football places us in good stead.

Dun Laoghaire Rathdown Sports Partnership – Consultation with Kevina Malone, Programmes Officer, 22nd June 2023.

Key points emerging from the consultation were as follows:

- There is definitely a need for Walking Football. There was not much out there [in terms of initiatives] aimed at older men.
- Initially there was a fear of injury arising through participation in walking football which had been badly run with no oversight. Local Sports Partnerships [including DLR Sports Partnership] were reluctant to get involved. The format and delivery of the Age & Opportunity Walking Football Initiative has provided reassurance.
- DLR Sports Partnership runs the 'Men on the Move' programme. This is a 12-week funded programme funded by the HSE which incorporates a number of sporting activities. Scope may exist to incorporate walking football into this programme. The community section of Dun Laoghaire Rathdown County Council may also be interested in the Walking Football Initiative. It would need to be promoted.
- In terms of resources, DLR Sports Partnership can provide assistance with recruitment, booking and (co)funding of local authority pitches and facilities, and the organisation of local mini blitzes.
- The issue of insurance needs to be addressed. DLR Sports Partnership has raised concerns regarding Age & Opportunity's current policy when booking pitches at local authority run facilities whereby Age & Opportunity seeks indemnification. Leisure centres are only responsible for their facilities. The organisation responsible for making the booking should carry the responsibility of minimising the risks of injury. Other partners do not have the same insurance requirements as Age & Opportunity.

Irish Men's Shed Association (IMSA) – Consultation with Rebecca McLoughlin, Health & Wellbeing Manager, 27th June 2023.

Key points emerging from the consultation were as follows:

- From an organisational perspective, IMSA has been delighted with the partnership that has been established with Age & Opportunity on the walking football. There has been brilliant feedback from the Men's Shed members.
- The walking football and collaboration with Age & Opportunity is also a good model for IMSA for other partnerships.
- IMSA wants to build sustainability by encouraging the men to continue with physical activity after completing the 12-week SFL programme. The walking football offers such an opportunity.
- IMSA is resourced to deliver Sheds for Life (SFL). We are currently not funded for step-down (follow-on) activities. Therefore, if walking football is to be offered as a core component of SFL, it would have to be delivered for the full 12 weeks. It was agreed this would not be practical.

- IMSA can provide access to men's sheds. This can be done at the IMSA Annual Awards. This presentation would be given by Age & Opportunity lead coach. Sheds interested in participating in walking football as a follow-on activity could then sign up with Age & Opportunity for the 5-week initiative.
- IMSA is willing to share information with Age & Opportunity on the 'pipeline' of men's sheds scheduled to participate in the SFL programme. SFL has been delivered to Donegal men's shed in recent months in cooperation with Donegal Partnership. These sheds would be candidates for walking football as a follow – on activity.
- In the autumn of 2023, the objective will be to deliver SFL to 7 or 8 sheds in Cork. Kerry sheds are next in the pipeline.

Provisional delivery dates and locations for the Sheds for Life programme from mid-2023 to end 2025 are set out in Figure 13 below. The programme will be delivered in the spring and autumn.

Figure 13 – Sheds for Life Programme (2023 – 2025)

Current programme 2023 P1 Sligo, Donegal (2 weeks in)
2023 P2 Cork City and Cork County
2024 P1 Kerry and Clare
2024 P2 Tipperary and Kilkenny
2025 P1 Wexford, Carlow and Laois
2025 P2 Offaly, Westmeath and Longford

**Source: Irish Men's Shed Association, May 2023.*

3.4 Coaching Team Observations

On 28th June 2023, a focus group discussion was held involving all current members of the Age & Opportunity walking football coaching team – Peter Mac Nulty, Stuart Langworthy, Albert Sugg, Brian Dooney and Paul McCabe. Sue Guildea, Age & Opportunity Active Programme Manager, and Nicole Evans, Active Programme Assistant Manager also attended. The discussion was moderated by lead coach Peter Mac Nulty.

The key observations and suggestions arising from the focus group discussion can be summarised as follows:

Observations

- In terms of reaching out and encouraging older men to be more active, the Walking Football Initiative has ‘hit the nail on the head’. To date, Age & Opportunity Active initiatives have been primarily taken up by women.
- We have lit a ‘touch paper’ and, in terms of potential, Age & Opportunity can bring this initiative wherever it wants.
- Today’s blitz (Wednesday 28th June 2023) has been a great success. It has provided a competitive outlet along with social engagement. Representatives from partner organisations and funding agencies were impressed.
- The only criticism was that the pitches were on the small side and cage design (with no sidelines) did not allow players get a rest. Unfortunately, there are no bespoke walking football pitches.
- The warmup routine sets the right tone for the walking football drills and matches and represents an important element in our delivery approach.
- Walking football can be inclusive with potential to appeal to both men and women.

Suggestions

The current delivery approach (based on 5 sessions for each group) works well. To build sustainability and extend the reach of the Walking Initiative, the following suggestions were recorded:

- Post session tea, coffee and biscuits should continue to be a core component of the delivery. This is an essential part in strengthening the social dimension of the Walking Football Initiative.
- Materials and resources on walking football need to be standardised and branded and made readily accessible to previous and potential participants in the Walking Football Initiative⁴. Such materials should include interviews, short video demonstration clips (on technique), best practice examples, rules etc.

⁴ Stuart Langworthy indicated that the Walking Football Association UK would be willing to share their materials with Age & Opportunity.

- 
- Continue with WhatsApp to maintain contact and distribute materials to managers/group leaders.
 - Age & Opportunity should arrange dedicated training initiatives to support walking football. The organisation of a Train the Trainers and Referee Coaching courses would serve to support groups involved in walking football and raise standards.
 - Another blitz should be planned for October.
 - Organise walking football demonstration match at League of Ireland fixture(s).
 - In response to open invitation from the Walking Football Association, organise an international fixture involving an Ireland X1 versus England Over 70s. The Ireland selection would be based exclusively on individuals who had participated in the Age & Opportunity Walking Football Initiative.
 - Clarification is required from IMSA on extent of insurance cover provided for men's shed members participating in walking football.

4. Evaluation

Reach

The Walking Football Initiative achieved its objectives. Consistent with Age & Opportunity's commitment in seeking to get older people back to physical activity following the Covid-19 pandemic and to connect with older men in particular, the initiative reached 134 individuals. 15 men's sheds, 2 League of Ireland football clubs, and one community group participated in the initiative.

Participating groups were recruited through a combination of Age & Opportunity contacts, Irish Men's Shed Association, and Dun Laoghaire Rathdown Sports Partnership.

Figure 14 - Walking Football Initiative – Reach

Group Description	Number of Groups	Number Participants	Average Age
Men's Sheds	13	102	70
Football Clubs	2	22	60
Community	1	10	45
Total	16	134	69

The average age of participants from the men's sheds was older than that of the football club participants and those from the Ballymun Community group which included transition year students from Trinity Comprehensive School, the venue for the latter group.

With the exception of former Irish international Linda Gorman⁵, all participants in the Walking Football Initiative were men. In addition to the 134 participants, the Walking Football Initiative also attracted other men as observers and interest from Women's Sheds.

Effectiveness

The Walking Football Initiative has been very effective in reaching older men and delivering significant physical, mental, and social benefits to this key demographic. As the results of the Survey of Walking Football Participants have indicated, older men who participated in the Walking Football Initiative clearly benefited in terms of increased levels of physical activity, enhanced confidence levels, friendships and improved social connectedness, and more positive attitudes to ageing.

⁵ Linda Gorman also participated in the Walking Football Referees Training Initiative in March 2023.



The Walking Football Initiative provided a platform for alignment and collaboration with key partners including the Irish Men's Shed Association, the Football Association of Ireland, and Dun Laoghaire Rathdown Sports Partnership.

Implementation

The Walking Football Initiative was overseen by Age & Opportunity Active Programme Assistant Manager Paul Gallier working in close collaboration with lead coach Peter Mac Nulty. Drawing largely on existing contacts which had been established by Age & Opportunity, the Active Programme Assistant Manager was responsible for identifying potential men's groups for the initiative, particularly in the early months. Further leads were generated by the Irish Men's Shed Association following the delivery of that organisation's 'Sheds for Life' programme. In the first quarter of 2023, further support was received from Dun Laoghaire Rathdown Sports Partnership which recruited four men's sheds to the Walking Football Initiative.

Following the 'recruitment' of men's groups, lead coach Peter Mac Nulty was responsible for overseeing all aspects relating to the delivery of the Walking Football Initiative. This included liaison with the primary contact in each group; arranging introductory meetings with each group at which the benefits and rules of walking football were explained; distribution of demonstration materials and videos; confirmation of dates and times for walking football sessions; rostering of coaches; delivery of coaching sessions with other coaches and presentation of equipment (i.e., footballs, bibs, and whistle) and certificates following the final session with each group.

In January 2023, Paul Gallier departed Age & Opportunity to take up a position elsewhere. In the intervening months, management of the initiative has been taken over by Active Programme Manager Sue Guildea with lead coach Peter Mac Nulty assuming additional responsibilities in terms of initiative planning, coordination, and administration. Such tasks included the vetting and booking of facilities; collection of insurance details; administration of Physical Activity Ready Check Form, Participant Questionnaires, and certificates. The lead coach also participated in meetings with key partners the Irish Men's Shed Association, Football Association of Ireland, and Dun Laoghaire Rathdown Sports Partnership to discuss the development of the Walking Football Initiative.

Post-delivery supports have been provided as part of the Walking Football initiative. Such supports include the provision of equipment to all participating groups to encourage continued participation in the activity. Blitzes have been organised to encourage ongoing participation and to respond to participants request for engagement with other groups. The annual Age & Opportunity National Grant Scheme is open to all participating groups. The FAI is currently working on an online Walking Football Information resource which will serve as an aid to recent participants and other individuals and groups seeking to get involved in walking football.

Maintenance

The Walking Football Initiative has demonstrated sustainability at several levels:

- **Physical and Mental Health Benefits.** Participants have benefited through increased participation in physical activity. The mental health of participants has also been enhanced through engagement in an enjoyable physical activity that is not seen as a chore.
- **Social Cohesion and Friendships.** Participants have derived 'added value' by engaging in a group activity. Older men enjoyed the dynamic and friendships associated with being 'part of a team', something that most of them thought they would never experience again. Even the non-participating observers derived enjoyment from the social dimension afforded through the walking football sessions and 'matches' in particular.
- **Self-sustaining Activity.** In January 2023, 6 of the 10 men's groups that had participated in the Walking Football Initiative since its inception indicated that they had continued playing walking football following their participation in the initiative. This trend has continued with 6 groups participating in the Age & Opportunity summer walking football blitz on Wednesday 28th June.
- **Catalyst for Recruitment.** Kilcoole Men's Shed reported that they were successful in recruiting new members as a result of their participation in the Walking Football Initiative.
- **Sports Facility Utilisation.** With most walking football sessions typically taking place in the mornings, all-weather sports pitches and other community facilities were utilised at times when they would otherwise have been idle.
- **Transferable Initiative.** The format for the Walking Football Initiative [based on 5 one - hour sessions over 5 consecutive weeks] has remained largely unaltered since the original pilot initiative with Naas Men's Shed in September 2021. The format has been well tested and works. It is easily transferrable.
- **Partnership Platform.** Organisations including the Irish Men's Shed Association, Local Sports Partnerships, and the FAI share certain common objectives with Age & Opportunity. The Walking Football Initiative provides a platform for partnership and collaboration between Age & Opportunity and its partners.



Walking Football Blitz, Bray, 28th June 2023

5. Recommendations

Against a background where Age & Opportunity's Active initiatives have attracted considerably higher levels of engagement from women compared to men, there is a consensus amongst participants, coaches, and partners that the sport of walking football can play an important role in reaching out and encouraging older men to become more active.

With the experience of successfully implementing the Walking Football Initiative over the past 16 months in Leinster, and with relationships now in place with key partners the FAI and IMSA, Age & Opportunity is now strategically positioned to bring the initiative to the next level. The following interventions and refinements are recommended:

- The Walking Football Initiative should be expanded as a **national initiative** open to older men across Ireland.
- The initiative should continue to prioritise **men's sheds** and older members of **football clubs** as the main targets for delivery.
- In addition to existing partners IMSA and FAI, it is recommended that partnerships be established with **Local Sports Partnerships** for the purpose of promoting and delivering walking football to communities. The LSPs are very well positioned to assist in identifying and recruiting men's groups at a local level.
- The current delivery format based on 5 sessions works well. Post session tea and coffee should be encouraged as a standard feature to facilitate **social engagement**.
- Provision of equipment to participation men's groups, ongoing **communication** with previous participants, blitzes, and referee training and 'Train the Trainer' courses should be continued as **core measures to promote the sustainability** of walking football.
- In addition, new measures are recommended to maximise the social potential of the initiative including demonstrations of walking football at League of Ireland matches and an international fixture against England Over 70's.
- Age & Opportunity should seek additional resources to continue and expand the walking football initiative. This should include administration, coordination & facilitation and the recruitment of additional coaches particularly in Munster, Connacht, and Ulster.
- In order to maximise response Age & Opportunity should consult with each group about the best way to gather data required by Sport Ireland 3 months after the initiative is completed.
- Age & Opportunity should consider review of insurance requirements for partners.

Appendices

Walking Football Initiative Participant Questionnaire



Walking Football Programme Participant Questionnaire

To help us grow Walking Football in other Men's Sheds and amongst older age groups generally, we would appreciate if you could take a few minutes to complete this questionnaire. This will provide Age & Opportunity with feedback on your experience of Walking Football which will be helpful for planning purposes.

In line with Age & Opportunity data collection policies, your own response to the questionnaire will be treated in confidence and will be aggregated with the responses of other participants.

A. Personal Information

1. Name

2. Please select the appropriate age bracket for you

- ☐ Under 30 years
- ☐ 31-40 years
- ☐ 41-50 years
- ☐ 51-60 years
- ☐ 61-70 years
- ☐ 71-80 years
- ☐ 80 years +

3. Contact Details

Phone Number:

Email Address:

4. In the past week, on how many days have you done a total of 30 minutes or more of physical activity, which was enough to raise your breathing rate. (This may include sport, exercise and brisk walking or cycling for recreation or to get to and from places, but should not include housework or physical activity that may be part of your job)

0 days	1 day	2 days	3 days	4 days	5 days	6 days	7 days
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B. Information on Walking Football participation

5. Coming to this Age & Opportunity Walking Football programme makes me feel:-

	Very much less	A little bit less	Neither more nor less	A little bit more	Very much more
More active	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
More visible	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
More connected to other people	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
More confident	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
More positive about ageing	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
More likely to engage with physical activity	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

6. What did you enjoy about Walking Football (please select all relevant options)?

- ☐ The physical activity
- ☐ The competitiveness
- ☐ The friendly environment
- ☐ The new relationships with others
- ☐ The social aspects
- ☐ Other

7. Would you recommend Walking Football to a friend?

☐ Yes

☐ No

8. Would you take part in a Walking Football programme again?

☐ Yes

☐ No

9. Would you like to take part in Walking Football on a weekly basis?

☐ Yes

☐ No

10. Would you like to take part in Walking Football blitz style activities with other groups from the locality and/or nationally?

☐ Yes

☐ No

11. What environment would you like to play Walking Football in the future (please select all relevant options)?

☐ I would like to play within my own Men's Shed

☐ I would like to play within my own Men's Shed and play against others groups

☐ I would like to play in a Walking Football league against other groups or clubs.

C. Walking Football Rules

12. Were the Walking Football rules explained clearly?

☐ Yes

☐ No

13. Did you find the Walking Football rules easy to follow?

☐ Yes

☐ No

14. What changes, if any, would you make to the Walking Football rules? *

15. Is there anything further that you would like to tell us about your experience of playing Walking Football?

Thank you for participating in this survey



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