



**Group:** *Ballymena walk to health group*  
**Council area:** *Ballymena Borough Council*

### ▶ **Background**

The Ballymena walk to health group was established in April 2002 when several local people trained as volunteer walk leaders. Initially the physical activity coordinator from the local health trust worked with the walk leaders to devise a short programme of walks. These walks were advertised to the local community to gauge interest in developing a regular programme of led walks.

The first walk attracted approximately 10 people and this number gradually increased each week. A decision was made to continue with the walks on a weekly basis.

### ▶ **Development**

Since being established in 2002, the Ballymena walk to health group has expanded and developed. After the first year the group was formally constituted, which enabled the walk leaders to access small grants to help sustain the walks programme. The number of participants has grown from an initial 10 to up to 100 people on each walk. The group walks all year round and since it started has only had to cancel one walk due to poor weather conditions. The group is supported by 18 fully trained walk leaders, many of whom have received 'Heartstart' emergency life support training. Each walk has a minimum of two walk leaders. All walk leaders have the opportunity to attend a walk leader network event twice yearly provided through the Northern Health and Social Care Trust.

### ▶ **Membership**

The walks are open to anyone but tend to attract people aged 50+ because the group meet on a Wednesday morning from 10.30am. The group is located in Ballymena and most walks start from the Seven Towers Leisure Centre in the town.

## **Programme**

Over the years the group has organised a varied programme of weekly walks with regular day trips to various locations throughout Northern Ireland. There is always a local walk available, even if there is an organised day trip that day.

Local walks always take place within the Ballymena Borough Council area and include places such as the People's Park, Ecos Centre, Broughshane river walk, Portglennone Forest and Highway to Health town walks. Day trips have included the Lagan towpath, Portrush, Rathlin Island, Bangor and the Roe Valley Country Park. Since the group was first established over 500 people have attended a led walk. The walk leaders organise three levels of walks to suit all ability levels. New members are made very welcome and join the group on a regular basis.

## **Partnerships**

A good partnership has been established with Ballymena Borough Council through the countryside officer. This has led to the council providing support and occasional refreshments for the walkers on their return from the local walk at Seven Towers Leisure Centre or The People's Park, Ballymena. A partnership has also been established with the Northern Health and Social Care Trust, who provide administrative support to assist with printing walk programmes and also provide emergency life support training for walk leaders.



# **Ballymena walk to health group**

## ▶ Advertising

The walk leaders meet on a quarterly basis to plan a 12-week programme of walks, which is then printed as a flyer. These flyers are distributed in the local area by walk leaders and through contacts within the health trust and local council. The walks are advertised in local facilities such as health centres, shops, leisure centres and the tourist centre. However, most members find out about the group through word of mouth.



## ▶ Cost

Most walks are provided at no cost to the participants. The exception is for walks that take place outside the local area. If the group receives funding this is often used to help subsidise transport to these walks. Those members with free travel passes are encouraged to use these for rail and bus journeys.

## ▶ Future developments

First aid training is soon to be offered to those members who possess the qualities of a good walk leader. It is hoped that this course will provide them with the confidence to take the next step and become walk leaders.

## ▶ Recommendations

- Welcome new members
- Produce a programme of walks in advance and advertise walks locally
- Provide refreshments and an opportunity to socialise
- Vary the programme of walks
- Consult with participants to gain feedback on walks and new ideas
- Make the walks fun and enjoyable
- Make use of free public transport for older people within your group
- Walk all year round

## ▶ Key contacts

### Frank McFarland

Volunteer walk leader Tel: 028 2586 2738

### Josie Higgins

Volunteer walk leader Tel: 028 2175 8644

## Profile of a volunteer walk leader

Josie Higgins is a 61 year old lady who trained as a walking leader in 2002 and has been involved with the walking group ever since. This was following encouragement from her local GP and practice nurse. If anyone had an excuse to not go out walking it was Josie, as she has both rheumatoid arthritis and osteoarthritis. This has resulted in Josie having to have operations on both feet and she is on a waiting list to have a knee replacement.



Josie helps organise and lead the weekly walks in the Ballymena area, making sure that the needs of beginners are taken into account by having three different levels of walks organised at the same time. Having a medical condition herself, Josie is an inspiration to others, and commented: "There are many people on the walks with medical conditions, some have had hip replacements, some have asthma and others have had heart surgery – they all say how the walks help them and their conditions."

It is immediately apparent on meeting Josie that she has a real zest for life and her enthusiasm is infectious – little wonder that the group has grown from strength to strength and regularly has 100+ people out each week!

On asking Josie what she would say to someone considering becoming a walking leader, she said: "It's a great achievement to become a walk leader, you can help inspire people and the social aspect is great. We need people to encourage others to enjoy the many benefits of walking, and best of all – it's free!"