

GM Walking Festival 2026

Evaluation report

Greater Manchester
Moving > ^ < v

Contents:

Introduction to the 2026 GM Walking Festival

Organisation and implementation

Story from the festival

Evaluating the impact

Next steps



Introduction to the GM Walking Festival



What is the GM Walking Festival?

Aligning with May's National Walking Month, the GM Walking Festival is an opportunity for organisations across Greater Manchester to host new walks and promote existing walks for people and communities to join.

The festival celebrates the variety of opportunities to walk with others, promotes the physical and mental health benefits of walking, and demonstrates the ways that walking can support people to live well, connect with others, and strengthen feelings of belonging in our neighbourhoods.



Celebrating connected communities

Every year the festival celebrates the power of walking, and this year was no different.

We also wanted to recognise the specific role that walking plays in supporting people to feel connected to the place they live and the people around them. For many communities across GM, there will have been moments where tensions may have felt higher and public spaces less safe.

With this in mind, we wanted the theme of this year's festival to be 'Celebrating connected communities', showcasing the power that walking has in bringing people together, bridging gaps, and celebrating diverse communities.

From city-region to neighbourhood, with 370 led walks hosted by over 120 different organisations and new partnerships formed, we are delighted to share the story of this year's festival.



Organisation and implementation



Organisation of this year's festival

In previous years, the GM Walking Festival has distributed small grants of £100 to community groups to support walk organisers to deliver to a walk during the festival.

As the work of GM Moving continues to evolve the role we play shifts.

In this year's festival resources were focused on developing partnerships in new sectors and creating spaces for people to connect and learn from each other.





The Guardian, Legacies of Enslavement project

This year we partnered with The Guardian to connect the GM Walking Festival with the work they have been doing around the Legacies of Enslavement in Greater Manchester.

We supported the development of the specification for the walks, were involved in the selection of the route makers, and supported the design of the routes through workshops and feedback on test walks.

A series of led walks exploring different parts of Greater Manchester's historic connections to the slave trade formed part of the festival's programme of walks.

Whilst we regularly recognise and promote the benefits walking has on our health and wellbeing, this offered something different. The connection with the culture and arts sectors allowed walking to become the vehicle by which people learnt about the history of our places, understanding how our buildings, street names, parks, and much more connect to parts of our history we have often ignored.

Beyond the production of new walking routes, this project has created unexpected outcomes. In a post project review, route creators talked about collaboration between organisations and individuals that would not have previously happened, and there has been new work emerging because of these moments.

There has also been value placed on people seeing GM Moving engaging with new sectors and connecting movement to wider social issues. Having walks as part of the festival which centred on exploring the histories of places and buildings gave members of the community permission to enter places which can often feel off limits.

Overall, the legacies of the project have been clear – there is an appetite and appreciation for this work. New walks in new places have been discussed, walks have inspired new works of art, and connections to new organisations such as Manchester Histories have been made.





Pre-festival workshops

A new addition to this year's festival was a series of pre-festival workshops, aimed at bringing walk organisers together around specific themes to share experiences and learn from each other.

Walk organisers play a key role in enabling people and communities to live well. We want the festival to become a tool to support a thriving ecosystem of people and organisations that are enabling people to walk more every day.

Before the festival started we hosted three online workshops where we invited people to come and share their work, explore shared challenges and identify learning that could be useful to others.

The themes of the workshops were:

- Women and girls
- Discovery and exploration
- Mental wellbeing

Story from the festival: Life Leisure

The GM Walking Festival exists to celebrate walking and the organisations and communities providing opportunities for people to move more and live well in their neighbourhood.

Leisure providers across Greater Manchester play a vital role in supporting communities to move more both in their facilities and outside. Over the past four years Life Leisure in Stockport have built an extensive and varied walk offer. Through Confidence Walks inside their facilities, a variety of walks round parts of Stockport, and quarterly challenges to encourage people to stay active, Life Leisure have been harnessing the power of walking to build community and keep people moving.

Their weekly walk in Brinnington is a fantastic example of the way walking can be a vehicle to have conversations around memories about places and neighbourhoods and form connections based on shared experiences on a street or in a park.



Story from the festival: Life Leisure

As a leisure provider Life Leisure are in a unique position to support people attending the walks to try new forms of activities. The walks provide key opportunities to have conversations about joining a gym or other classes, and work with people to better understand the barriers they might face to doing this.

These walks work because of the approach taken by Life Leisure. Working in a person-centred way they meet people where they are, over a cup of tea in a space that feels comfortable. There isn't always a set route for the walk, it is led by the conversation and where people want to go. And importantly, the walks happen no matter what, creating consistent support and community that can be relied on. They have created the conditions for these walks to thrive.

These conditions have been created by a clear trust and desire from Life Leisure in what they are doing and why, but they have also been enabled and supported by the Place Partnership investment from Sport England which allowing for different ways of doing things to happen.



Evaluating the impact



Data and insight:

Sector breakdown

The data from the walk submissions indicates a similar picture to previous years of the festival in regards to the sectors organising walks.

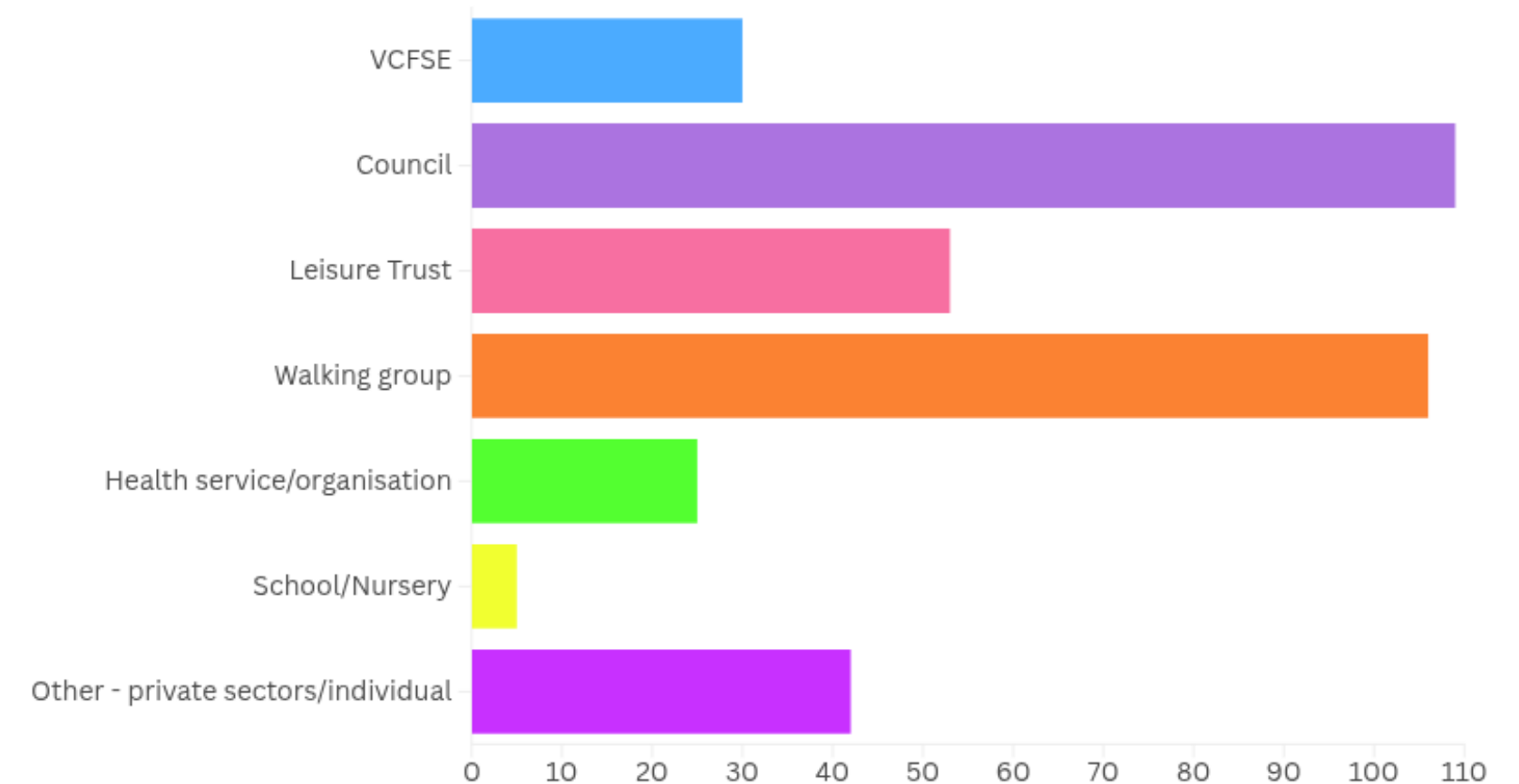
There are some slight deviations from last year's festival with the VCFSE contributing less walks (53 compared with 84 last year) and council/leisure trusts submitting more (159 compared with 115 last year).

Over the past few years GM Moving's festival team have been working to grow connections between the Walking Festival and the Health and Care sector.

Working in a more intentional and targeted way we are seeing the number of walks submitted from health care organisations/providers grow. With 25 walks submitted from health care providers this year compared with 13 last year.

GM Walking Festival 26

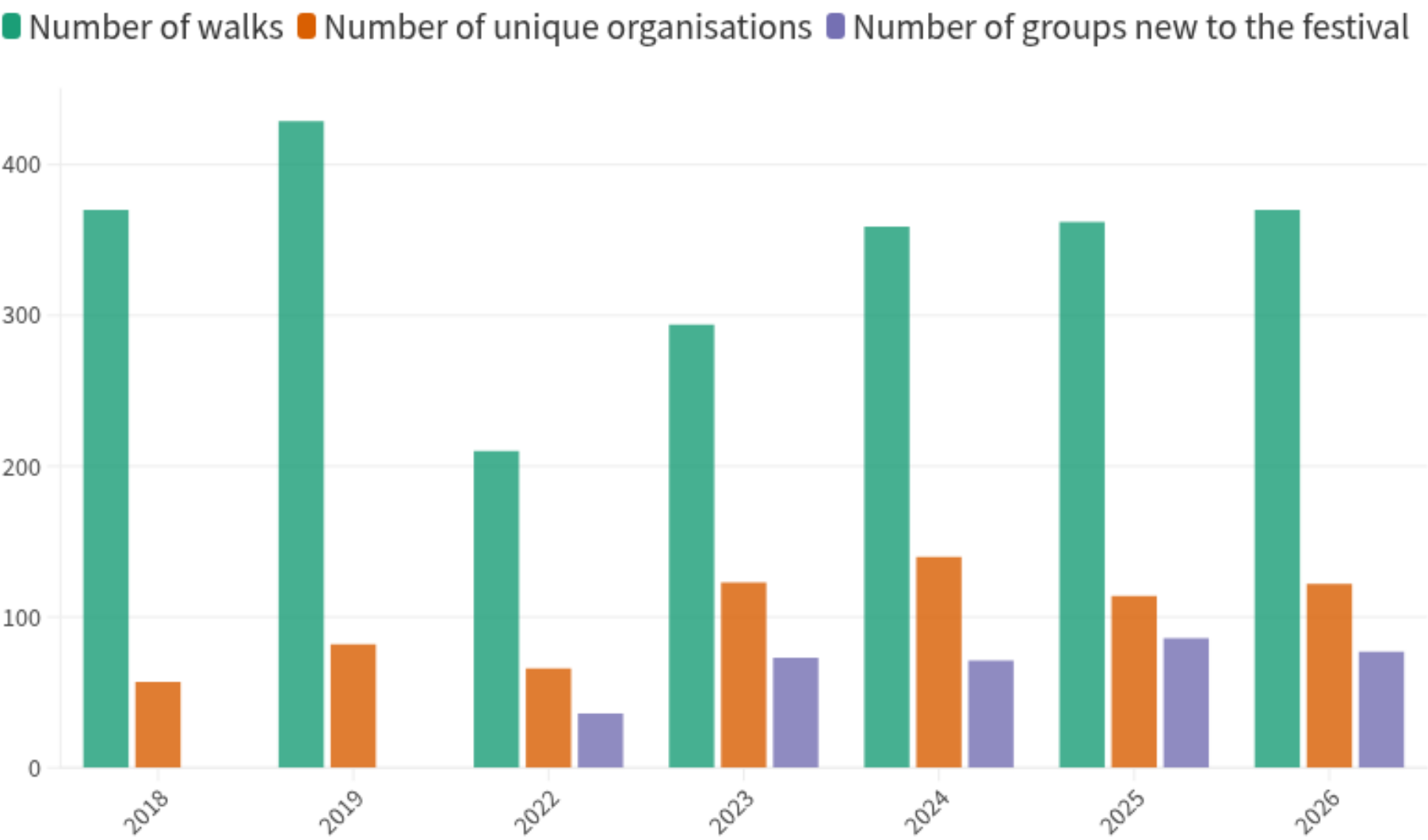
Walks by sector



Data and insight:

Growth over time

Participation over time



Tracking the growth of the festival provides one way for us to measure its success. GM Moving took over organising the festival from Transport for Greater Manchester in 2019. This shift signified a new way of organising the event with a stronger targeted approach focusing on the areas and demographics with higher levels of inactivity.

There is no data from 2020 and 2021 due to Covid-19, and the data from the last three years is reflective of the festival’s post-Covid recovery and a period of testing new approaches.

The overall number of walks submitted in 2026 was 370, a slight increase from 362. Since 2024 the number of walks has stabilised. Whilst growing the number of walks is a core aim, the diversity of the sectors engaged, and the festival’s legacy has become more of a focus.

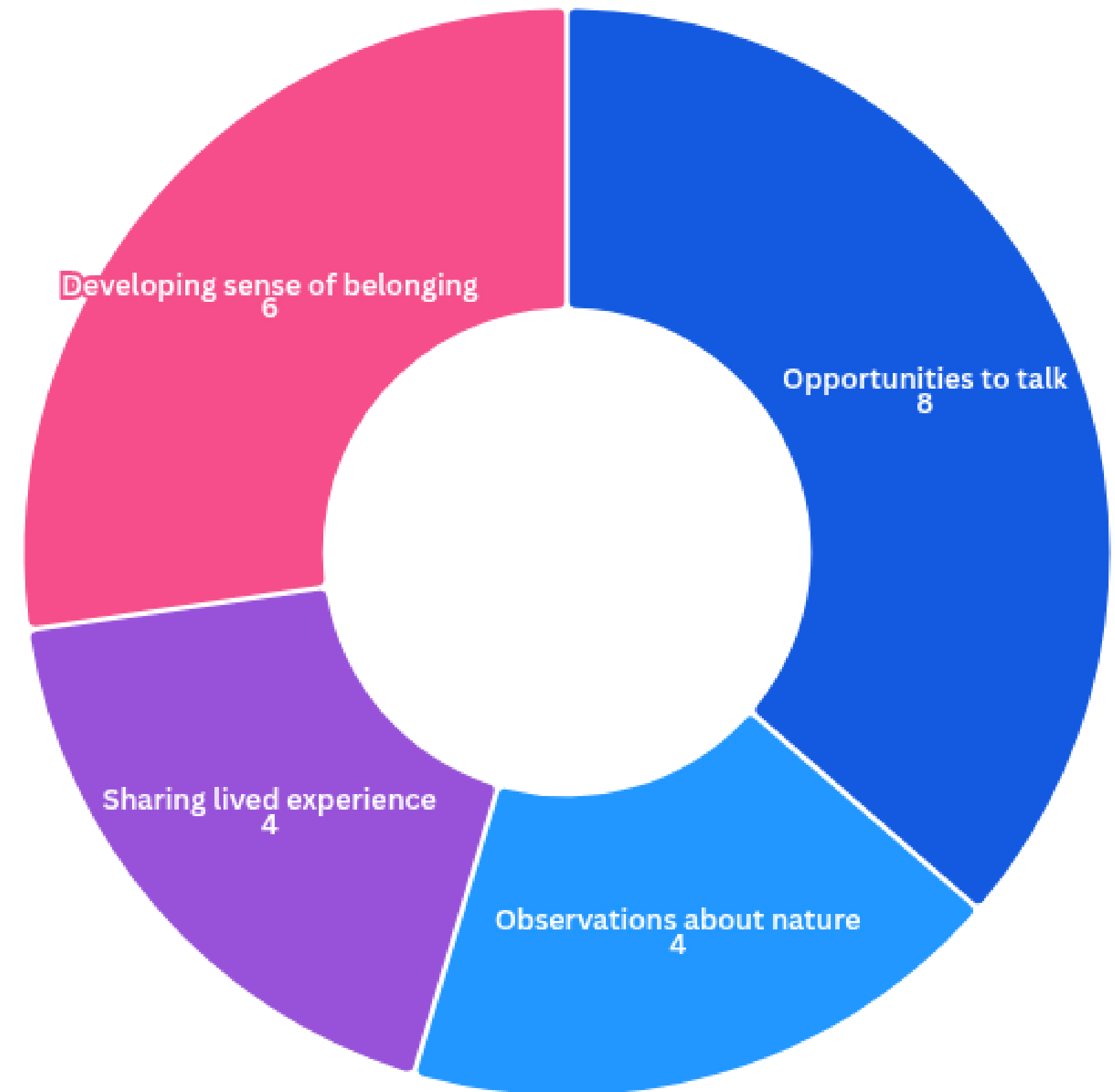
Data and insight:

Impact of the walks

The numbers help us gain a better understanding of the growth and reach of the festival across GM, but we also want to understand how organisations connect to the festival and the impact their walks have on people and communities.

Through feedback collected in a walk organiser survey we can start to get a sense of the number of people who have been supported to walk during the festival.

Organisers reported that their walks attracted anywhere between 6 and 30 people on a single walk and those who put on a series of walks have reported supporting hundreds of people to move across the month.



Walking's role in supporting social connections

Recognising the role walking plays in supporting social connections we asked organisers what moments of connection they observed. It is clear that first and foremost walking creates an opportunity for conversations that might otherwise have been missed, allowing people to connect to the people and place around them.

“Participants naturally began chatting as the walk progressed, sharing observations from nature, photographs they had taken, and personal experiences. The gentle, low pressure format helped people feel comfortable connecting with others and several participants who had not met before were talking and walking together by the end of the session.”

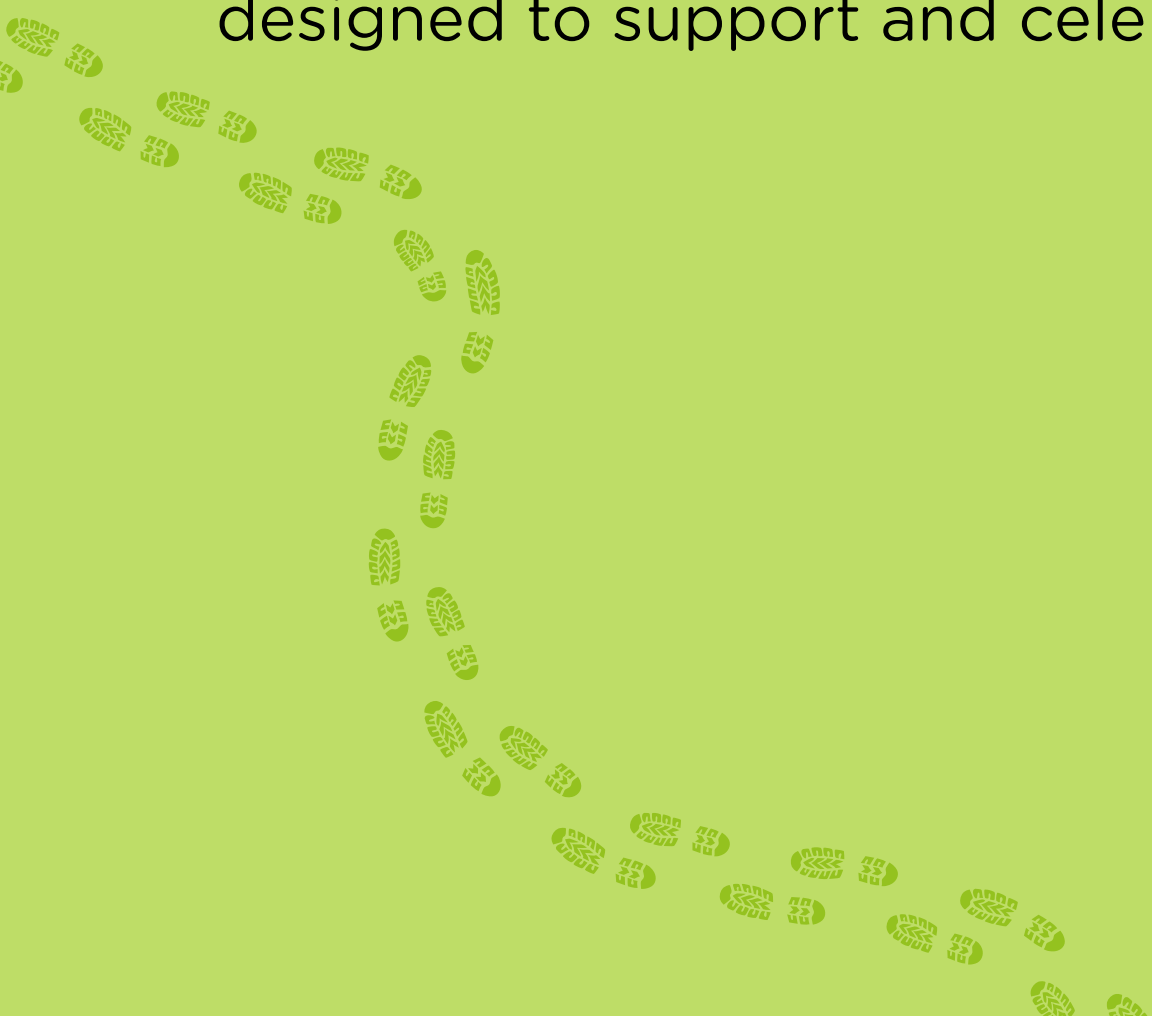
“During the walk, participants who were strangers at the start naturally began talking, sharing experiences, and supporting one another. Our inclusive and welcoming environment helped people feel comfortable joining conversations and connecting with others from different backgrounds. As the walk progressed, friendships started to form, with participants exchanging contact details and expressing interest in attending future activities together. These moments were particularly valuable for those who may experience isolation or lack confidence. By the end of the walk, there was a clear sense of belonging, community, and mutual support”



Public spaces play a big role in supporting people to be active

We know that outdoor public spaces play a key role in supporting people to be active, and the walking festival provides opportunities for people to get to know new places in their local area. Most walk organisers surveyed reported that the walks introduced participants to green and blue spaces that they hadn't been to before.

Supporting people to feel more comfortable in their local environment is a significant benefit of organised walks, and in the long-term may lead to people being more active. We know that people and organisations across GM are working hard all year round to get communities walking and so the walking festival is designed to support and celebrate this.



“Some participants were visiting the location for the first time, while others discovered paths, viewpoints and areas they had not previously explored. The walk encouraged people to slow down, notice their surroundings and appreciate local green spaces in a new way.”

“For some women, the walk was their first experience of regularly accessing local green spaces. Despite living in the area, barriers such as low confidence, lack of information, cultural factors, or not having someone to walk with had prevented them from visiting these spaces before.”

Walking as a celebration of community

8 was the average score when asked ‘On a scale of 1-10 how much did your walk feel like a celebration of community? (1 being not at all and 10 being a complete celebration of community).

“I was on such a high. I felt connected to nature and all the members that came on the walk. Such an uplifting joyous occasion. Plan to take part in it next year too.”

“People came together who would not have necessarily met before. The attendees were a range of ages and backgrounds, people came with children, other family members, friends or alone”

“The walk felt like a celebration of people and communities because it brought together women from different backgrounds, cultures, and experiences in a welcoming and inclusive environment.”



Next steps

Across our team and with our partners work to get the 2027 Walking Festival up and running will begin right away. Over the coming months we will:

- Develop the 2027 approach with stakeholders
- Identify and agree the strategic theme for Festival
- Use updated data and insight to inform targeted approaches

As we continue to work in a whole-system way we will also be strengthening our connections to the 2027 Live Well Festival. Working in partnership to use walking and wheeling to grow a movement to support people and communities to live well.



Thank you!

A huge thank you to everyone who took part in this year's GM Walking Festival; our partners across Greater Manchester, walk leaders, and the people and communities who get involved to make the festival so successful.

If you would like to get involved in next year's festival join the GM Walking mailing list [here](#).

If you would like to find out more about how we are creating the conditions for walking and wheeling across GM get in touch with Louise, our Strategic Lead for Walking and Active Environments:

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