

**The Highland Green Health Partnership  
Agenda Item 4  
Think Nature Health Walks**

**Background**

In 2020, following the removal of support for rural Highland health walk groups by Partnerships for Wellbeing (PFW); Think Nature Health Walks Project was created thanks to support across the Highland Green Health Partnership (HGHP). A Health Walk Coordinator was hosted within HTSI to service the Caithness, Sutherland, Skye, Lochalsh and Wester Ross and Lochaber Health Walk groups as well as establishing new groups. The HGHP provided match funding towards this project, with funding from Paths for All Walking for Health Fund and Smarter Choices Smarter Places Open Fund secured on a year to year basis by Highland Third Sector Interface (HTSI). In 2024 HTSI made the decision that they could no longer support this role due to the increasingly tight funding landscape. In July 2024 the funding came to an end and the project folded. All walking groups were contacted to highlight future options for them – either to join the Scottish Health Walk Network (SHWN) as an independent group or via the umbrella project with PFW. The projects final report can be viewed [here](#).

**Current situation**

Seven groups have so far contacted SHWN to find out more information; so far only two have joined the network independently. One of the buggy walks in Inverness is likely to join with PFW. Three groups contacted PFW and communicated to them that they would instead join the SHWN. Given the historical context with PFW it is understandable that the health walks that were previously under their umbrella might be reticent about rejoining. We think this leaves around 11 groups in currently unsupported.

The Cairngorms and Inner Moray Firth areas continue to be supported by a coordinator, as part of the Cairngorms National Park Volunteer Manager's remit and Walk Manager at PFW, respectively.

**Role of a health walks coordinator**

A coordinator is invaluable to the development and sustainability of a health walk programme. They provide support to existing groups and volunteers, and build collaborative partnerships to develop new health walks. The coordinator helps to maintain a focus on reaching those experiencing, or at risk of, developing long term health conditions through informal engagement & training for volunteers. They provide coordination, cohesion and links to wider networks, promoting the programme beyond the reach of the individual groups. The coordinator collates evaluation and identifies gaps in provision. The Think Health Think Nature Walk Manager role was a 3 day/week post.

**Risks arising from the lack of rural Highland health walk coordination and support**

<b>Risk</b>		<b>Outcome</b>
1	Without local coordination there is a risk to the sustainability of existing walks and no support for the development of new health walks.	While existing walks may be able to recruit new volunteers from existing walkers and local contacts, the additional support of a coordinator is invaluable. Meeting training needs will be much harder. New health walk development will be very limited with no staff member or project for rural Highland.
2	There is a risk of widening health inequalities of participation in exiting walks.	Without the project officer to target action at those with long term conditions and within target groups the existing health walks area at risk of becoming less accessible to those who have most to benefit. In addition those groups that are not members of the SHWN are no longer advertised on the Paths for All health walk map- a resource used by healthcare practitioners.
3	There will be no monitoring or evaluation of provision or identification of gaps.	While some data will be collated if health walks join the SHWN as independent groups, with no rural Highland project coordination no data will be collected.
4	There is a risk that project momentum & identity will be lost.	With the folding of Think Nature Health Walks we have lost the collective identity for Rural Highland Health Walks.
5	With no coordinating project some health walks are currently operating with no support or insurance.	While the partnership is not responsible for the existing groups there is perhaps a reputational risk by association and an ethical consideration around removal of coordinator support.

## Supporting New Volunteers and Groups

While there is some possibility of groups gaining access to Walk Leader Training and other training via PFW or indeed through Paths for All's central training programme, this is currently limited in capacity. The rural context of these localities requires consideration and accessing training based in Inverness is not generally feasible. Online options do make this easier.

Courses can be arranged through Paths for All, who have advised that freelancer training costs are as follows:

- Walk Leader Training £650
- Dementia Friendly Walk Leader Training £500
- Strength & Balance workshops for Walk Leaders £500
- Strength & Balance workshops for Care Staff £500

## Discussion points

Members of the Highland Green Health Partnership are invited to:

- Discuss **any** options to support rural health walks going forwards.
- Consider if there are any opportunities to integrate support for rural health walks into existing organisations and roles.

Author: Kate Thomson  
NHS, Health Improvement Specialist  
21/11/24