



# Evaluation of Age UK's Walking Tennis Programme



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**January 2026**

## Acknowledgements

The authors sincerely thank everyone who participated in this evaluation for generously sharing their time and insights. We are particularly grateful to the Walking Tennis participants who shared their personal stories and experiences. Your contributions were invaluable in helping us understand the success of Age UK's Walking Tennis programme and the potential areas for development.

We also wish to thank colleagues at Age UK National for their support in guiding this evaluation and facilitating its delivery.

## Table of Contents

<b>Acknowledgements .....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Executive Summary .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>1. Introduction .....</b>	<b>8</b>
1.1 Background .....	8
1.2 Research aims.....	9
1.3 Research methodology .....	9
<b>2. Delivery of the Walking Tennis Programme .....</b>	<b>11</b>
2.1 Group set-up .....	11
2.2 Delivery model .....	13
<b>3. Coach and volunteer recruitment .....</b>	<b>18</b>
3.1 Coach recruitment.....	18
3.2 Volunteer recruitment .....	20
<b>4. Participation in the Walking Tennis groups .....</b>	<b>22</b>
4.1 Profile of Walking Tennis participants.....	22
4.2 How regularly did participants attend?.....	22
4.3 Why did some participants stop attending?.....	24
<b>5. Older people's experiences of Walking Tennis .....</b>	<b>28</b>
5.1 Why did older people decide to join Walking Tennis?.....	28
5.2 What did participants think of Walking Tennis? .....	31
<b>6. Outcomes of the Walking Tennis Programme .....</b>	<b>34</b>
6.1 Outcomes for participants .....	34
6.2 Wider outcomes .....	39
<b>7. Lessons learned about Walking Tennis delivery .....</b>	<b>42</b>
7.1 Organising Walking Tennis .....	42
7.2 Promoting Walking Tennis .....	43
7.3 Delivering Walking Tennis .....	44
<b>8. Sustainability of the Walking Tennis Programme .....</b>	<b>46</b>
<b>9. Conclusion and recommendations.....</b>	<b>49</b>

## Executive Summary

### Introduction

The Walking Tennis programme was developed by Age UK in partnership with the Lawn Tennis Association's (LTA) Tennis Foundation to address barriers to physical activity among older adults. Walking Tennis is designed to be inclusive and offers a slower-paced, modified version of tennis, making it suitable for individuals with limited mobility or long-term health conditions.

Eight local Age UKs were selected to deliver Walking Tennis. Each received funding between May 2024 and September 2025 to establish and deliver two Walking Tennis groups in their area.

### Research methodology

O'Donnell Research & Evaluation conducted a qualitative evaluation of the Walking Tennis programme between May 2024 and December 2025. The evaluation sought to answer the following research questions:

1. Why did older people choose to join the Walking Tennis groups? And what did they think of Walking Tennis?
2. Why did older people who attended regularly continue to do so? And what prevented those not participating regularly from doing so?
3. What are the key factors local Age UKs and other organisations need to consider when organising, promoting and providing Walking Tennis for older people, and to ensure that the sessions are sustainable after the project funding has finished?

This report is based on feedback from 85 stakeholders involved in delivering, supporting, or participating in Walking Tennis. Case-study visits, observations of Walking Tennis sessions, and face-to-face and telephone interviews were undertaken at different stages of the programme. This includes interviews and focus groups with:

- Local Age UK project leads, at programme start and end
- Coaches and volunteers delivering sessions
- Wider stakeholders supporting delivery (e.g., tennis club managers)
- Current Walking Tennis participants
- Older adults who had started and then discontinued their involvement in Walking Tennis.

### Key findings

#### Delivery

- Across the eight local Age UKs, a variety of models were adopted for delivering Walking Tennis, each reflecting local population needs and resources. Sessions took place in a range of venues, including tennis clubs, leisure or community centres, community tennis courts, and a local Age UK activity centre, highlighting the game's adaptability across settings.

- Across all 16 Walking Tennis groups, sessions consisted of at least one hour of tennis, followed by refreshments and an opportunity for social interaction. The social element was central to participant engagement and contributed to the positive outcomes associated with Walking Tennis.
- Where they were available, local Age UKs used a mix of indoor and outdoor spaces to deliver Walking Tennis, accommodating changes in the weather. This dual model was considered the ideal delivery model because it ensured continuity for participants. However, it was dependent on the local facilities available.
- Where possible, the choice of venues for the Walking Tennis sessions was based on local Age UK's existing partnerships with local venues. However, new partnerships with venues were also developed through the programme. Venue availability, cost and accessibility for older adults were important considerations. Some project leads reported being constrained by limited tennis facilities in their area and found it challenging to secure suitable venues.
- Coaches emphasised the importance of adapting Walking Tennis sessions to participants' needs, abilities and preferences and praised the flexibility of Walking Tennis. While some sessions featured a strong coaching element, others adopted a more relaxed approach, emphasising enjoyment and keeping older adults active.

### **Coach recruitment**

- Some local Age UKs found it challenging to source suitable coaches to deliver the Walking Tennis sessions. While some of the coaches recruited were LTA-qualified and had experience of coaching tennis or other racquet sports, others had little tennis experience. In such cases, coaches were selected for their experience coaching other sports and/or working with older adults and individuals with disabilities or long-term health conditions.
- Overall, feedback on the coaches was very positive, and they were widely recognised as being pivotal to the programme's success. Project leads and participants praised coaches' skills, enthusiasm, patience, and rapport with older adults, as well as their ability to make the sessions engaging and accessible for older adults with diverse needs and abilities.

### **Volunteer recruitment**

- The degree of success in recruiting volunteers varied across the eight local Age UKs. However, where they were involved, they were considered key to the success and sustainability of the Walking Tennis groups. In addition to providing administrative and coaching support to the group, the volunteers' role in facilitating the social activity and serving as a consistent and welcoming presence was particularly important for building group cohesion.

### **Older people's experiences of Walking Tennis**

**Research question 1: *Why did older people choose to join the Walking Tennis groups? And what did they think of Walking Tennis?***

- As a result of word-of-mouth and ongoing promotion, the number of participants in most groups increased steadily over time. By the end of the funded programme, 299 older adults had

participated in at least one Walking Tennis session, demonstrating the programme's success in engaging older adults.

- Older adults joined Walking Tennis to try a new sport and stay active, to reconnect with a sport they enjoyed, improve their health, meet new people, and add structure and enjoyment to their lives – all in an inclusive, accessible and supportive environment.
- Participants were overwhelmingly positive about Walking Tennis, regardless of their previous tennis experience. In particular, older adults appreciated that:
  - sessions were fun and relaxed, and suitable for a range of ages and abilities
  - they had a skilled coach delivering the sessions
  - there was a warm, welcoming atmosphere at the sessions
  - sessions offered a social element, which included refreshments
  - sessions felt safe and well-supported.

## Participation

**Research Question 2: *Why did older people who attended regularly continue to do so? And what prevented those not participating regularly from doing so?***

- Attendance at the Walking Tennis sessions was generally regular and consistent, supported by strong group cohesion and proactive communication. Participants aimed to attend each week because they enjoyed the sessions so much, with some attending both the weekly Walking Tennis sessions offered by their local Age UK.
- Personal barriers to attendance included holidays, illness or injury, medical appointments, childcare duties for grandchildren, or religious festivals. Although delivery of the Walking Tennis sessions was generally regular and consistent throughout the programme, some issues arose that affected participant attendance. These included coach or venue unavailability, unfavourable weather conditions and changes to the day or time of sessions.
- Overall, consistent delivery of the day, time, and venue for the session, as well as a warm and inclusive group culture, were key contributors to regular attendance.
- Not all the older adults who signed up for Walking Tennis continued their involvement. The main reasons for discontinuation of Walking Tennis included personal issues such as health problems or competing commitments; however, some older adults also cited session-related matters, such as a dislike of the slower pace, a lack of competition, and changes to the venue.

## Outcomes

- A range of positive outcomes were reported across all eight local Age UKs – for participants, as well as the wider community.
- Participants reported significant physical, mental, and social benefits. These included:
  - improved physical health, such as mobility, balance, and stamina
  - improved tennis skills, and for some participants, re-engagement in a sport that they had previously enjoyed
  - enhanced mental well-being, including increased confidence and reduced feelings of isolation

- new friendships and a sense of community, and participation in other physical and social activities.
- Coaches and volunteers also benefited, gaining new skills and experiencing personal reward. Local Age UKs expanded their client base and strengthened local partnerships. At the same time, tennis clubs and other venues increased their court utilisation and revenue and enhanced their visibility with the local community.

## Lessons learned

**Research Question 3: *What are the key factors local Age UKs and other organisations need to consider when organising, promoting and providing Walking Tennis for older people, and to ensure that the sessions are sustainable after the project funding has finished?***

The most important factors identified through the evaluation that are key to organising, promoting and delivering Walking Tennis sessions are:

- *Organising Walking Tennis:* Successful Walking Tennis groups require early planning, strong partnerships, and accessible venues. A proactive project lead, committed coach and well-supported volunteers are key, as is collaboration with the LTA and local tennis teams for long-term growth.
- *Promoting Walking Tennis:* Promotion should combine digital and non-digital approaches, as well as community outreach. Word-of-mouth, alongside participant testimonials and visual imagery, encourages engagement. Ongoing promotion is key to sustaining participant numbers.
- *Delivering Walking Tennis:* Delivery must be tailored to participants' needs, emphasising social interaction and inclusivity. Skilled coaches, consistent scheduling and volunteer presence build trust and retention. A warm and welcoming environment is central to participant attendance and well-being, and indoor options help ensure year-round delivery.

## Sustainability

- All eight local Age UKs plan to continue at least one of their Walking Tennis groups beyond the funding period. While nearly all groups will continue to be coordinated by the local Age UK, a few will be delivered by tennis clubs or by participants themselves. Other sustainability strategies included modest fee increases and additional funding. Embedding Walking Tennis in local tennis development plans and providing guidance for venues and coaches will further support long-term sustainability.

In conclusion, Age UK's Walking Tennis programme, delivered in partnership with the LTA's Tennis Foundation, was widely regarded as successful by those delivering, supporting, and participating in Walking Tennis. It has demonstrated value in promoting physical activity among older adults and enhancing their emotional and social well-being. The success of Walking Tennis lies in its adaptability, social focus, and ability to engage individuals who might otherwise remain inactive. Continued collaboration between Age UK, the LTA, and local partners will be essential for the future growth and sustainability of Walking Tennis.



## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Background

There is substantial evidence demonstrating the benefits of regular physical activity for people of all ages, but these benefits are particularly significant for older adults, who are more likely to experience long-term health conditions and social isolation<sup>1</sup>. Physical activity acts as a protective factor against chronic diseases, including cardiovascular disease, stroke, and diabetes. In later life, it is also associated with reduced risk of falls through improved strength and balance, better mental health, and decreased loneliness.

The Chief Medical Officer's guidelines (2019)<sup>2</sup> recommend that adults aged 65 and over should:

- Aim to be physically active every day, even if it is just light activity.
- Do activities that improve strength, balance and flexibility on at least two days a week.
- Complete at least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity activity per week, or 75 minutes of vigorous-intensity activity if already active, or a combination of both.
- Reduce time spent sitting or lying down and break up long periods of inactivity.

Despite these recommendations, many older people face significant barriers to being physically active, including illness, disability, frailty and loss of confidence. Almost two-thirds (62%) of adults over 55 years are classed as 'inactive', and activity levels decline further with age, with inactivity rising to 47% among those aged 75 to 84 and 70% among adults aged over 85<sup>2</sup>.

### Walking Tennis Programme

To address these challenges, Age UK partnered with the Lawn Tennis Association (LTA) Tennis Foundation to develop the Walking Tennis programme – a slower-paced, adapted version of tennis designed to be inclusive and enjoyable for people of all abilities. The programme aligns with Age UK's commitment to active ageing and the LTA Tennis Foundation's mission to make tennis more inclusive. Modifications such as allowing two bounces, prohibiting running or jumping, and using smaller courts and lighter equipment make Walking Tennis accessible, while retaining the physical, cognitive, and social benefits of traditional tennis.

All local Age UKs across England and Wales were invited to apply to deliver Walking Tennis in their area, and the following eight areas were selected for delivery:

- Age UK **Blackburn with Darwen**
- Age UK **Calderdale and Kirklees**
- Age UK **Devon**

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<sup>1</sup> One step at a time (2022): <https://www.ageuk.org.uk/siteassets/documents/reports-and-publications/research-report-2019--one-step-at-a-time.pdf>

Langhammer B, Bergland A, Rydwick E. The Importance of Physical Activity Exercise among Older People. Biomed Res Int. 2018 Dec 5;2018:7856823. doi: 10.1155/2018/7856823. PMID: 30627571; PMCID: PMC6304477.

<sup>2</sup> UK Chief Medical Officers' Physical Activity Guidelines (2019): <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5d839543ed915d52428dc134/uk-chief-medical-officers-physical-activity-guidelines.pdf>



- Age UK **Lincolnshire**
- Age UK **Shropshire, Telford and Wrekin**
- Age UK **South Kent Coast**
- Age UK **Sutton**
- Age UK **Waltham Forest.**

## 1.2 Research aims

Age UK commissioned O'Donnell Research & Evaluation to conduct a qualitative evaluation of the Walking Tennis programme between May 2024 and December 2025. The evaluation sought to answer the following research questions:

1. Why did older people choose to join the Walking Tennis groups? And what did they think of Walking Tennis?
2. Why did older people who attended regularly continue to do so? And what prevented those not participating regularly from doing so?
3. What are the key factors local Age UKs and other organisations need to consider when organising, promoting and providing Walking Tennis for older people, and to ensure that the sessions are sustainable after the project funding has finished?

## 1.3 Research methodology

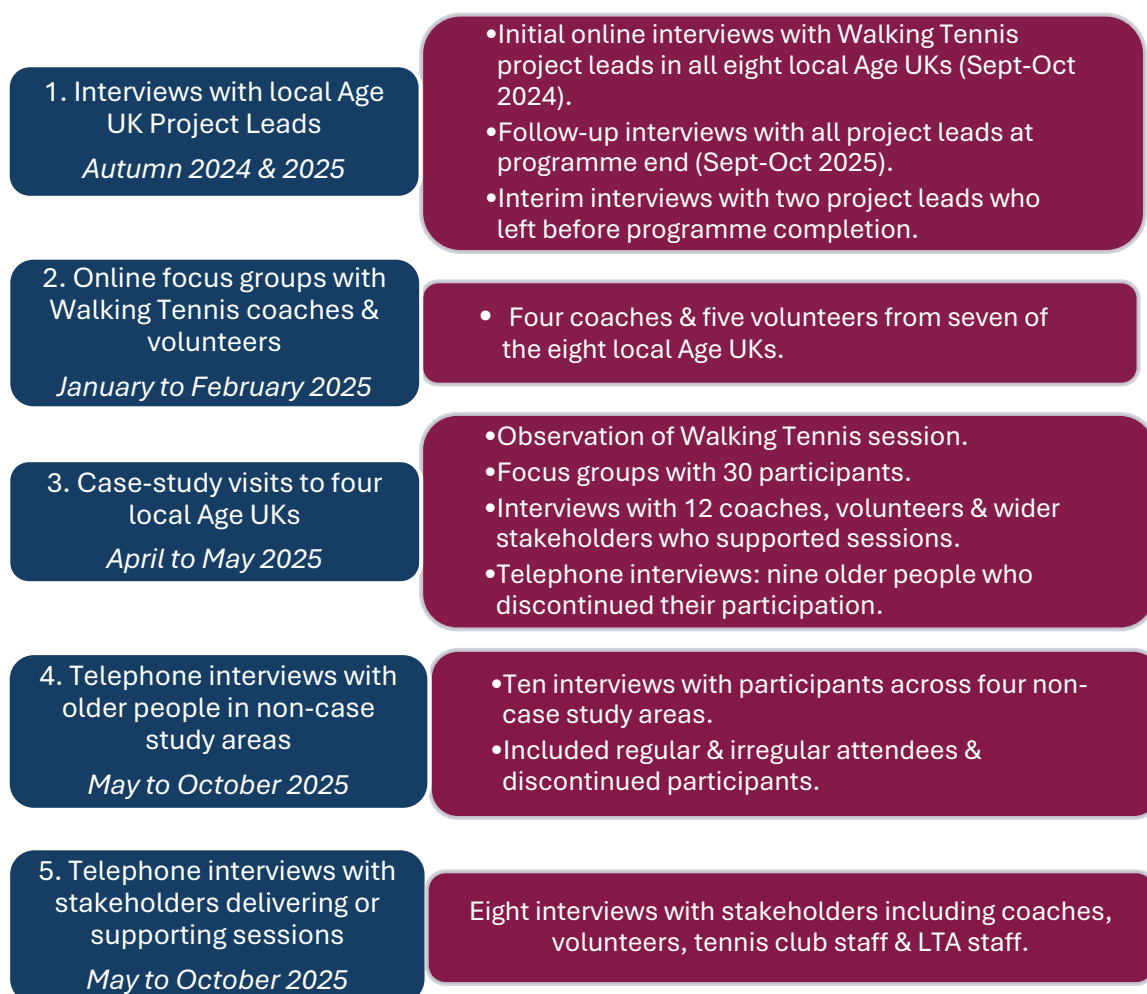
This evaluation focuses on qualitative data collected and analysed by O'Donnell Research & Evaluation through observations, interviews, and focus groups across the eight local Age UKs delivering the Walking Tennis programme. The methodology was designed to capture diverse perspectives from local Age UK project leads, coaches, volunteers, participants, and wider stakeholders.

The evaluation comprised five complementary strands of data collection, as shown in Diagram 1. The report is based on feedback from 85 stakeholders involved in the Walking Tennis programme. Table 1 shows the different numbers of stakeholders interviewed during the evaluation.

**Table 1. Number of interviewees involved in Walking Tennis evaluation**

Stakeholder	Number of interviewees
Current Walking Tennis participants	38
Discontinued Walking Tennis participants	11
Coaches delivering Walking Tennis	11
Volunteers supporting sessions	10
Local Age UK project leads & staff	8
Wider stakeholders supporting sessions (e.g., tennis club managers, Open Court leads)	7
<b>Total</b>	<b>85</b>

**Diagram 1: Walking Tennis evaluation methodology**



In addition to the qualitative evaluation, monitoring data for all participants who registered for the Walking Tennis sessions were collected by the local Age UKs and provided to the evaluation team in aggregated form. The headline findings from the analysis of this monitoring data are included in this report where appropriate.

## 2. Delivery of the Walking Tennis Programme

Eight local Age UKs were selected to deliver the Walking Tennis programme, in partnership with the LTA's Tennis Foundation. Each of these local Age UKs received funding between May 2024 and September 2025 to set up and deliver two Walking Tennis groups in their area, with each group aiming to recruit at least ten older people and deliver 40 sessions. The programme's implementation in each local Age UK was coordinated by a Walking Tennis project lead.

In order to reach older people at greatest risk of inactivity, the successful applicants were asked to engage with one or more of the following target groups:

- older people on lower incomes
- older people living with one or more long-term health conditions
- older people living with a disability
- older women.

### 2.1 Group set-up

At the start of the programme, local Age UKs carefully considered their local context and existing provision when deciding where to establish the Walking Tennis groups and who to target. They took into account, for example, the geographical context of their area, the population and demographics of older people across the area, the tennis facilities available and the existing activities within their locality. When considering potential venues, project leads sought to utilise the existing relationships they had with venues and providers. They also considered the ethos and facilities at venues, as well as their accessibility and suitability for older people.

A few of the local Age UKs had experience setting up and delivering other walking sports, and they drew on this prior knowledge to help them set up, promote, and budget for Walking Tennis, as explained by one project lead:

*'Fortunately for us, because we have been delivering walking sports for three or four years now, we've had quite a good experience. So, I think when this came along, we were quite confident that we could get it set up and running without much trouble, from all the previous experience that we've had.'* (Project lead)

Most of the Walking Tennis groups were established by June or July 2024, but a few took a little longer than expected due to challenges in finding suitable venues or coaches. By September 2024, all 16 Walking Tennis groups were set up, and sessions were being delivered.

#### 2.1.1 Marketing and promotion

While both the LTA and Age UK had clear publicity plans for Walking Tennis and promoted the programme at a national level (for example, through their respective websites and through the LTA's County Tennis

network<sup>3</sup>), local Age UKs were responsible for promoting it to older people within their own areas. All the project leads reported that recruitment to the Walking Tennis groups at the outset of the programme was slower than anticipated. Although they were experienced in promoting their activities and services to older people and utilised a wide variety of promotional strategies, some local project leads felt that the limited information on Walking Tennis in the initial stages of the programme, and the lack of photos or videos demonstrating what the sessions would involve, was a barrier to participation.

Three main marketing strategies were used by local Age UKs to promote Walking Tennis:

- Promotion to existing users and networks
- Promotion via external networks
- Promotion using digital or print marketing

All the local Age UKs initially used their internal referral routes and publicised Walking Tennis to their existing service users (e.g., through newsletters and promotion at Age UK activities/clubs). However, this approach did not prove to be particularly effective, so local Age UKs supplemented it with external promotion targeted at the specific groups of older people they hoped to recruit. This included utilising their existing relationships with other local organisations working with older people (e.g. dementia or Parkinson's groups, local care homes and assisted living facilities), as well as promoting Walking Tennis to networks such as social prescriber and social worker hubs.

The local Age UKs also used both digital marketing (mainly Facebook posts and other social media) and print marketing, such as posters and flyers in local community spaces, as well as newspaper advertisements, to reach more older people. Several local Age UKs also promoted their Walking Tennis groups on local radio stations. The local Age UK project leads emphasised the importance of using a variety of strategies to promote Walking Tennis and focusing on places where older people are likely to frequent (e.g. GP surgeries, cafés, libraries, local shops, other groups, such as bowls clubs). Paper promotion (flyers/posters) was considered more accessible to older people, while project leads had mixed views on the effectiveness of social media promotion.

Where local Age UKs were working in partnership with tennis clubs or community venues, they also asked them to promote Walking Tennis to their existing members and networks, which had some success.

While local Age UKs undertook most of their promotion at the start of the programme, they recognised that ongoing promotion and recruitment were required to reach their target of ten participants per Walking Tennis group, or to maintain sufficient numbers. Some areas re-launched their Walking Tennis groups in spring/summer 2025 to coincide with Wimbledon and other major tennis championships, and to make the most of the warmer weather, which proved effective. One local Age UK, for example,

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<sup>3</sup> LTA County Tennis teams, otherwise known as County & Island Associations, are responsible for the development of tennis throughout their county. They provide a range of additional support and services to clubs, parks, community sites and schools to help them provide tennis opportunities for players of all ages and abilities. They also organise county teams, competitions and interclub leagues: <https://www.lta.org.uk/about-us/in-your-area/counties/>

organised a Walking Tennis celebration event for both of their groups, with opportunities for play and refreshments.

Overall, project leads felt that word of mouth among older people was the most effective tool for recruiting new participants to their Walking Tennis sessions, although they acknowledged that this more organic growth takes time to develop. Most of the local Age UKs were able to overcome barriers to recruitment, and in nearly all the local Age UKs, combining word of mouth with some ongoing promotion resulted in a steady organic growth of the groups. However, in one local Age UK, despite extensive promotion, recruitment remained challenging, and this was thought to be due to limited demand for tennis among the target group (older women) in the local area, and the affordability of the sessions:

*'We've done lots and lots of promotion with health information stands at different events to promote it; it's been on the local radio, it's been in the local paper, we've done press releases, we've done all sorts. It's been shared with all the GPs.... with the local council for all their social prescribers. But numbers are just really low.'* (Project lead)

## 2.2 Delivery model

The implementation of the Walking Tennis programme was designed by Age UK and the LTA Tennis Foundation to be flexible, with no fixed model of delivery directed at local Age UKs. Consequently, across the eight local Age UKs, a variety of delivery models were adopted for delivering Walking Tennis, reflecting local needs and resources. This was considered to be a key facilitating factor in the successful implementation of the programme and demonstrated the ability of Walking Tennis to be adaptive and delivered in a range of settings, as summed up by one coach:

*'I think Walking Tennis is for all, no matter what kind of health conditions, age, whatever, you can just adapt it, whatever suits you really...I think it can work anywhere... the space we have, it's not the biggest of rooms and we're indoors....so at first you think, how can that venue work? But it does.'* (Coach)

In all but one of the eight local Age UKs, the project lead coordinated the set-up and delivery of the Walking Tennis groups themselves, including finding venues, recruiting coaches and volunteers, promoting the sessions, and managing payments. In some cases, tennis clubs and other local partners, such as Open Court leads<sup>4</sup> or County Tennis teams, provided support with recruiting coaches, which the project leads found helpful; however, this was not the case across all areas. In the eighth local Age UK, the logistics of setting up and delivering the sessions were managed by an external provider, a local sports management company, in partnership with Age UK. This partner sourced the venues, recruited the coaches, and communicated with participants.

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<sup>4</sup> Open Court leads are the local contacts for the national LTA Open Court programme, ensuring tennis is 'Open For All' within their region: <https://www.lta.org.uk/roles-and-venues/coaches/products-and-programmes/open-court/>

### 2.2.1 Venue type

Sessions took place across a range of venues, including tennis clubs, leisure or community centres, community tennis courts, and a local Age UK activity centre, highlighting the game's flexibility. In two local Age UKs, both Walking Tennis sessions took place at the same venue – a local tennis club (either due to a lack of suitable alternatives or for consistent delivery) – whereas in the remaining six local Age UKs, the sessions were delivered at different venues to reach different populations of older adults within their locality. One local Age UK, for instance, delivered one of its sessions at its Age UK activity centre, while the other was delivered at a local tennis dome.

The choice of venues for the Walking Tennis sessions was based, where possible, on local Age UK's existing partnerships with venues or local partners, as well as on factors such as availability, cost and accessibility. Project leads highlighted the benefits of existing links with venues, as these facilitated the set-up and organisation of the groups. In other cases, project leads had established new relationships with venues and local partners, most commonly tennis clubs, and they welcomed these new partnerships.

The quantity and quality of tennis venues varied across the local Age UKs, particularly in terms of facilities deemed suitable and accessible for older people. Some project leads felt constrained by the limited number of tennis venues in their area and found it challenging to find a suitable venue with easy transport links, parking, accessible toilet facilities, and a suitable space for the social activity following the session. While all the local Age UKs managed to find venues to deliver both of their Walking Tennis groups, the size and quality of the space to deliver both the tennis and social aspects of the session varied considerably. While some venues offered a mix of indoor and outdoor courts and had dedicated space for refreshments, such as a café or restaurant, this was not available in all the venues. Some groups were creative with their arrangements for the social element and set up a space at the side of the courts or travelled a short distance to a nearby café or indoor space. However, the ideal scenario for encouraging attendance at the social activity was a warm and welcoming dedicated space for refreshments.

Where possible, local Age UKs used a mix of indoor and outdoor spaces to deliver Walking Tennis, accommodating changes in the weather. This dual model was viewed as the ideal delivery model for delivering Walking Tennis as it helped to ensure the sessions could be delivered and provided continuity for the participants. However, this approach was not always possible as it depended on the local facilities available.

In some cases, delivery was solely indoors (e.g., in a tennis dome or community centre), enabling consistent delivery all year round, regardless of weather conditions. Such indoor facilities not only provided a covered space for sessions but, in many cases, also offered other important benefits, such as a café, accessible toilets, and private space, which was reportedly preferred by some older people. However, the potential drawbacks of indoor facilities included poor acoustics, bright lighting and, in some venues, smaller court sizes.

In contrast, in a minority of local Age UKs, Walking Tennis sessions were delivered outdoors for most of the programme. While some project leads and coaches emphasised the added benefits of outdoor sessions on participants' health and well-being, stating that many participants preferred the outdoors,

bad weather had impacted some of the sessions and the frequency and regularity of participant attendance. Outdoor sessions were deemed too risky over the winter, due to slippery courts, and most groups transitioned venues seasonally, moving indoors during the winter months, albeit in some cases, to a more expensive or smaller venue such as a community hall or scout hut.

### **2.2.2 Relationships with venues**

Most project leads reported positive relationships with their Walking Tennis venues, and some had developed strong collaborative partnerships through the programme. These partnerships were built on mutual benefit – Age UK brought new members and publicity for the venues, while they provided the facilities. In some areas, venues offered free court hire, reduced rates and flexible scheduling to support the Walking Tennis groups and provided access to social spaces and other facilities. At one Age UK, for example, where the relationship with the tennis club was particularly positive, the restaurant manager developed a bespoke lunch menu for Walking Tennis participants at a reduced rate, which was well received and generated additional revenue for the club.

Where project leads reported partnerships with venues to be less positive, this was due to communication breakdowns or bureaucracy at larger, more commercial venues. At one local Age UK, for instance, the venue initially refused access to its accessible toilet facilities and café to Walking Tennis participants. After negotiation, the project lead resolved this; however, they did not feel the venue was supportive of the group. Project leads emphasised the importance of having realistic expectations and clear communication with venues from the outset.

Alongside *initial* difficulties in securing suitable tennis venues, some local Age UK groups encountered further challenges *during* the programme, including venue booking conflicts, the closure of a community centre, a fire at a tennis club, and damage to a tennis dome. Project leads were responsive in finding alternative venues or adjusting session arrangements to ensure the continued running of the groups. Overall, the Walking Tennis sessions mostly continued with minimal disruption, highlighting the groups' resilience and commitment. However, in two local Age UKs, sessions were unable to run for 4-6 weeks due to venue unavailability.

### **2.2.3 Session structure**

Across all 16 Walking Tennis groups, sessions consisted of at least one hour of tennis, followed by refreshments and social interaction. There was broad similarity across the different Walking Tennis groups in the format of the sessions, which generally included structured warm-ups, drills, an element of gameplay and a cool-down activity. The exact structure of the sessions varied depending on participants' abilities and, to some extent, on the number of participants and the court space available. For example, in sessions with high numbers of participants, players were rotated on the courts to give everyone the opportunity to play.

Coaches emphasised the importance of adapting the session to participants' needs, abilities and preferences, and praised the flexibility of Walking Tennis. While some sessions reportedly featured a strong element of coaching around technique and closely followed the Walking Tennis rules, others took a more relaxed approach, focusing on fun and keeping older people active. One local Age UK, for



example, adapted their Walking Tennis offer and introduced a slightly modified format for one of the sessions – a cardio tennis session, which was more energetic and involved music. Another local Age UK offered a less intensive seated Walking Tennis class at its Activity Centre for older people with mobility problems or long-term health conditions.

The level of competition built into the sessions also varied according to participants' preferences. While some coaches said that they wanted to keep the sessions fun and informal, others recognised that some participants enjoyed a competitive element:

*'As soon as you give them any kind of challenge, they're very competitive. The natural instinct comes out. So, then age goes out the window and they're all 20-year-olds again and they're all battling it out!'* (Coach)

#### **2.2.4 Social activity**

Following the tennis sessions, participants were invited to stay for refreshments and social interaction. Coaches, volunteers and participants agreed this was a crucial element of the programme, as it provided older adults with an opportunity to socialise and, in many cases, build social connections. The tennis session itself provided a focus for conversation each week and often served as an easy icebreaker for those new to the group. The factors that seemed to contribute to a well-attended and successful social activity included its location in a warm and welcoming environment, close to the tennis courts, provision of hot drinks and food and being led by a local Age UK staff member or volunteer, to encourage group cohesiveness.

#### **2.2.5 Transport**

The local Age UKs recognised the importance of making the Walking Tennis sessions as accessible to older people as possible, and this was a key consideration for project leads when selecting venues. They aimed to choose venues that offered both easy parking and good public transport links. Where transport arrangements were difficult for some participants, group members supported each other in providing lifts to and from sessions to facilitate attendance.

One local Age UK recognised that transport can often be a barrier to participation for older adults, particularly those with disabilities or long-term health conditions. Consequently, part of their Walking Tennis budget was used to provide group transport to participants to and from the tennis venue. The cost of this transport was included in the cost of the sessions, so that it was not a barrier to potential participants. Indeed, this offer of transport was hugely appreciated by the participants and provided a significant incentive for regular attendance.

#### **2.2.6 Cost of sessions**

The cost of the Walking Tennis sessions for participants and the payment structures in operation varied across the local Age UKs. In one local Age, for example, the sessions were free of charge to participants throughout the funded programme, while another offered ten sessions for free to encourage initial participation and then moved to a charged model. In the remaining local Age UKs, the cost of the sessions

for participants ranged from £2 to £6, with variation in whether this cost included refreshments following the session.

In addition to ensuring that they covered the cost of delivery, project leads considered the demographics of older people in their area and the cost of other activities offered when deciding on the cost of the Walking Tennis sessions. Generally, feedback from participants was that the sessions were *'good value for money'*. However, in one local Age UK, local cost sensitivities and expectations had proved to be a barrier to participation in Walking Tennis. The cost per session in this area had been set at £2, which did not fully cover the cost of running the session; however, even this low charge had been prohibitive for some older people. The project lead explained that *'we are one of the most deprived areas of the country and people just don't have the money'*. They added that they were competing with an *'ingrained culture around free activities'* in the local area, which meant that older people were reluctant to pay for the Walking Tennis sessions as they expected them to be provided for free.

On the whole, local Age UKs adopted a pay-as-you-play model for the Walking Tennis sessions, where participants paid for each session they attended – either in cash or using cashless systems. Local Age UKs were usually responsible for managing the payments (as opposed to the coach), and this meant that a staff member or volunteer from the local Age UK staff had to attend each session to take payment from participants. One local Age UK initially took a different approach and adopted a five-week block booking process, however, this proved to be confusing for participants and challenging for the project lead to manage so they changed to a pay-as-you-play model. As the programme progressed, some project leads reviewed the payment structure or system they were operating. After discussion with participants, some local Age UKs moved to a cashless or pre-paid system for efficiency and safety (so that staff were not carrying large amounts of cash).

### 3. Coach and volunteer recruitment

#### 3.1 Coach recruitment

Local Age UKs were responsible for recruiting and paying for a suitable sessional coach to run the Walking Tennis sessions. The national Age UK team and the LTA offered support and guidance to project leads on recruiting an appropriate coach, including sharing contact details for the LTA Open Court lead and the County Tennis leads in each area.

Local Age UKs had mixed experiences of recruiting suitable coaches to deliver their Walking Tennis sessions. While some project leads reported that recruitment had been organised or facilitated by the tennis clubs they were working with, others found it challenging to source coaches who could deliver Walking Tennis. These project leads would have welcomed additional support from the LTA in sourcing qualified tennis coaches at the start of the programme.

Given that Walking Tennis was in its relative infancy nationally at the start of this programme, there seemed to be few qualified coaches with prior knowledge of Walking Tennis, with only one coach reporting prior experience delivering Walking Tennis. While some of the coaches recruited by local Age UKs were LTA-qualified and had experience delivering tennis or other racquet sports, others had little tennis experience. In such cases, the coaches had been selected for their experience in coaching other sports and/or working with older adults, individuals with disabilities, or those with long-term health conditions. Their commitment, availability and interpersonal skills were considered to be more important than their previous tennis experience.

#### Coaching style and ethos

Overall, feedback on the coaches was very positive, and they were widely recognised as central to the programme's success. Project leads and participants praised coaches' skills, enthusiasm, patience, and rapport with the older people, as well as their ability to make the sessions fun and accessible for older people with differing needs, as the following comments illustrate:

*'I think it's lovely the way he doesn't make anybody feel inadequate. I love the way he encourages people. He's got a lovely way about him that he makes everybody feel valued.'* (Project lead)

*'I have observed them both and they are just 'people people'. You can tell that they love the sport, but you can also tell that they love talking to people about the sport and how to get them into the sport. They are both patient, both very good at adapting the sessions to meet people's needs.'* (Project lead)

Where challenges with coaches were reported by project leads, they generally related to poor communication from coaches, last-minute cancellations of sessions and a lack of coach availability during school holidays. There was some turnover of coaches across the local Age UKs during the programme, either due to coach unavailability or concerns about quality or commitment; however, the sessions largely continued uninterrupted.

The coaches interviewed during this evaluation were positive about their involvement in Walking Tennis and felt that the sessions were working well. They all welcomed their involvement in Walking Tennis, and commented on how fun the sessions were, and how they enjoyed seeing the participants progress in their tennis skills and physical abilities:

*'I actually look forward to the sessions. You know, they're great fun.... there's a lot of stories to be told and they actually do really put a lot of effort into the sessions.'* (Coach)

*'For me as a coach...I feel good after as well...it doesn't feel like work. It's just something that I enjoy doing. So, I think if you can say that it's a really good thing.'* (Coach)

### Support for coaches

In the early stages of programme delivery, the coaches interviewed felt they had received little information about Walking Tennis or working with older adults. While they had been given some information on the rules of Walking Tennis, they were unsure how a session should be structured. Given that many of the coaches had little or no prior knowledge or experience of Walking Tennis (or tennis, in some cases), some of them initially felt *'a bit daunted'*, both about delivering Walking Tennis and/or working with older people:

*'I've got a 94-year-old on court... I've got quite a few elderly and when I first started, I was like, oh, gosh, and there wasn't much information on it and it was just go slow, experiment and, you know, go at their pace and feel your way.'* (Coach)

Coaches reported conducting their own research on Walking Tennis because they felt they had not received sufficient information or support at the start of the programme. Although the LTA offered local Age UKs access to its Tennis Activator training<sup>5</sup>, none of the coaches interviewed were aware of it. The project leads felt that training was not targeted at older people, so they had generally not shared it with the coaches and volunteers involved in Walking Tennis. Coaches would have welcomed further support and guidance from the LTA and Age UK at the start of the programme on how to structure a session and work with older adults. One coach, for example, said that a video demonstrating a Walking Tennis session would have helped him visualise how a session would work and give him ideas for drills and warm-up activities. Other coaches would have welcomed opportunities to share ideas and practice about Walking Tennis delivery between the groups. Two coaches reported that they would have liked guidance on working with older adults, such as first aid training or risk assessments:

*'It can be so complicated, I mean, I've got people with back problems and neurological problems and it's a bit daunting really. So, it would be good if there was some kind of support there. You know, just even an online course would help.'* (Coach)

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<sup>5</sup> The LTA's Tennis Activator training teaches volunteers how to facilitate fun, accessible, introductory tennis sessions in communities, focusing on movement and games rather than formal coaching: <https://www.lta.org.uk/roles-and-venues/volunteers/become-a-tennis-volunteer/>

*'We know how to make the environment safe. We know the basics of it - a clear court, which applies to this, but it's just any extra risks which I could have been made more aware of.'* (Coach)

The newer coaches recruited to the programme felt more informed about Walking Tennis, reflecting the more comprehensive information and guidance on Walking Tennis developed by LTA over the course of the programme, as the following comment illustrates:

*'On the [LTA] website, there's loads of information... the website's got all videos and everything...so it's pretty quick to pick up and the rules are quite easy to follow...The LTA gave us plenty of information on what the rules are, what the structure is, what's the expectations of the sessions.'* (Coach)

Over time, the coaches felt they had grown in confidence as they got to know the abilities and preferences of the participants and experimented with the best way to structure the sessions. One coach, for example, described their experience as *'a little journey...just experimenting'*, while another reflected that *'I guess you learn as you go. I think you adapt to the participants and kind of their needs.'*

### 3.2 Volunteer recruitment

Although coaches were recruited to deliver the Walking Tennis sessions, local Age UKs were advised to seek volunteer support for the sessions, to either support with the administrative aspects of the session (e.g., promotion, payments, refreshments) or the tennis activity itself. Success in recruiting such volunteers for Walking Tennis, however, was variable across the eight local Age UKs and two of the groups had not been able to find or retain volunteer support throughout the programme. In contrast, one Walking Tennis group had recruited three volunteers, which was thought to have contributed significantly to its ongoing success. Volunteers were mostly recruited through Age UK marketing or through the tennis clubs. While a few volunteers had previously volunteered for Age UK, others were new to the organisation or to volunteering.

#### Role of the volunteers

Where local Age UKs had been able to source volunteers, they were considered essential to the success and sustainability of the sessions, and their contributions to the groups were praised by project leads, coaches and participants. As well as providing administrative support to the project lead (for example, collecting payments from participants and facilitating completion of participant paperwork), volunteers also provided crucial support to the coach during the sessions, particularly when they had prior tennis experience. Coaches reported they could focus on coaching participants and giving one-to-one advice, knowing there was an extra person to monitor the group's safety and well-being. Volunteers' role in facilitating the social activity was also considered particularly important for encouraging attendance and building group cohesion. As the programme progressed, some volunteers also felt confident in temporarily facilitating the Walking Tennis sessions in the coach's absence (e.g., due to illness or holiday), supporting the continuity of the group.

The volunteers themselves described their role as being a consistent, warm and welcoming presence for participants, supporting the coach with the tennis elements of the session and facilitating the social activity, as the following comments illustrate:

*'I'm a friendly face every week...I think it helps. I bring a set of cards, I play draughts...so if anybody wants to do any of that, I'll get up and I'll do that with them. Or if we just want to chat, we'll chat.'* (Volunteer)

*'I make sure they are greeted – a friendly face, say hello – that makes a difference. With first-timers, try and build a bit of rapport, confidence building.... help them integrate.'* (Volunteer)

*'You have a slightly different eye because you're watching in case someone gets breathless and you're able to show an element of care.'* (Volunteer)

Feedback from the volunteers was, overall, very positive – they enjoyed their involvement in the sessions and commented on the positive relationship with, and communication from, the project lead. One volunteer, for example, stated:

*'It's been one of the most rewarding things I've ever done...it enables me to work with nice people, and you hear a bit about their lives and their issues...you also see, for some people, quite a considerable improvement and that's always nice.'* (Volunteer)

However, the volunteers in one local Age UK felt that there was scope for improvement in the communication between them and the project lead, highlighting the need for clear communication and expectations both at the outset and on an ongoing basis. One volunteer, for example, explained that they had not been informed when sessions had been cancelled or rearranged. Another volunteer would also have appreciated further information and guidance on Walking Tennis and working with older people before they started their role. None of the volunteers interviewed had undertaken the LTA's Activator training.

## 4. Participation in the Walking Tennis groups

As a result of word of mouth and ongoing promotion, in most groups, the number of participants grew steadily and stabilised over time. This section summarises the profile of older adults participating in Age UK's Walking Tennis programme and the factors affecting their participation.

### 4.1 Profile of Walking Tennis participants

By the end of the funded programme (October 2025), the total number of older people who had participated in at least one Walking Tennis session had reached 299, demonstrating the programme's success in engaging older adults in Walking Tennis. According to Age UK's monitoring data, there were an average of six attendees at each session; however, some groups had much larger numbers of participants, with one group exceeding 20 participants.

Overall, the local Age UKs had been successful in reaching and engaging older adults from a range of demographics, including those from the four target groups set by Age UK (older adults on lower incomes, those living with a disability or long-term health condition and older women). Analysis of the participant monitoring data revealed that the 299 participants who had engaged in Walking Tennis had the following characteristics:

- **Age:** While nearly a quarter (24 per cent) were under 65 years, three-quarters of participants were aged 65 or over, and 32 per cent were aged 75 or over.
- **Gender:** 75 per cent of participants were female, while 25 per cent were male. Three of the local Age UKs had set up a women's-only Walking Tennis group to specifically target older women, who generally have lower participation in sport and physical activity.
- **Ethnicity:** 83 per cent of participants were White British, to some extent reflecting the ethnic background of older people in the local Age UKs delivering Walking Tennis. Ten per cent of participants were Asian or Asian British (one group targeted Asian women), and one per cent were Black or Black British.
- **Disability or long-term health condition:** Just over a quarter reported living with one or more disabilities. Two-thirds of participants indicated that they were living with one or more long-term health conditions, demonstrating Walking Tennis' suitability for older adults with a range of abilities and medical conditions, including but not limited to: Parkinson's, heart problems, arthritis, visual and hearing impairments and dementia.
- **Previous experience of tennis:** Participants ranged from total beginners at tennis and other racquet sports to experienced tennis players – 44 per cent had never played tennis before, while 41 per cent had previously played tennis, but had stopped.

### 4.2 How regularly did participants attend?

Older adults' attendance at Walking Tennis sessions was generally regular and consistent, and this seemed to be supported by strong commitment and cohesion within the groups, as summed up by one coach: *'Attendance has been tremendous...there is real loyalty to coming and playing.'* In many areas, a



core group of participants remained engaged throughout the programme, and new members also continued to join. Most of the participants interviewed reported that they regularly attended Walking Tennis because they enjoyed it, *'so much so that I don't want to go on holiday this year'* (Participant). Regular participants reported arranging their other commitments around the Walking Tennis sessions because *'we like it so much we don't want to miss it.'*

As would be expected with any organised activity, participants were not able to attend every Walking Tennis session, and some participants attended less regularly than others. Overall, however, most participants aimed to attend each week, and indeed some participants attended both the weekly Walking Tennis sessions on offer in their local Age UK. Due to demand from participants in one local Age UK, a third weekly Walking Tennis group was established in April 2025.

There were occasional, temporary dips in participant attendance throughout the programme. For example, the monitoring data for all local Age UKs shows a decline in attendance in December 2024 compared with autumn. Attendance then steadily grew over spring/summer 2025, possibly due to improving weather, reaching a high in July 2025, with dips in May and August 2025. The factors affecting older people's attendance at the Walking Tennis sessions are discussed below.

#### 4.2.1 Barriers to attendance

Where attendance at the Walking Tennis sessions was less consistent, or where there were occasional dips in attendance, this was either due to barriers related to the sessions or personal, individual-level barriers to participation.

##### Session-related barriers

Although delivery of the sessions was, on the whole, regular and consistent throughout the programme, some issues arose that temporarily prevented the sessions from running or discouraged participants from attending. These included:

- **Coach unavailability** – Coaches occasionally cancelled sessions due to illness, holidays, or a clash of commitments. Where possible, a replacement coach was found, or volunteers or participants ran the sessions themselves, however, this was less common in the initial stages of the programme, when participants were less confident.
- **Unfavourable weather** – Although participants in some areas were described as *'a hardy bunch'* and willing to play Walking Tennis in all weather conditions, unfavourable weather, such as rain, ice and high temperatures, meant that a few sessions had to be cancelled. Some participants also reported that they were less motivated to attend when the weather was poor. In a few groups, the outdoor courts became waterlogged or slippery during heavy rain, while at one local Age UK, the tennis dome became too hot during the summer. Cancelled sessions due to bad weather were rare, and this decision was often made by the coach or project lead in consultation with the participants. Where possible, the coaches adapted the sessions to reduce potential risks to participants (e.g. playing indoors if facilities were available; regular drinks breaks and playing in the shade during hot weather).

- **Problems with the venue** – Several issues with venues arose throughout the programme, including damage to a tennis dome, slippery courts due to condensation in a dome, facility maintenance, and court unavailability during school holidays. This led to some cancelled sessions, changes to session timings or changes to the venue, which affected participant attendance.
- **Changes to the day or time of sessions** – A few groups had to change the day/time of the Walking Tennis sessions during the programme to accommodate coach or court availability. In some cases, this was a temporary change, while in others it was permanent. Such changes meant that some participants were unable to attend on the new date/time due to other commitments.

While session cancellations were rare and often occurred due to unforeseen circumstances, it was clear that consistency in delivery was key to encouraging regular participation among older adults. Participants reported that they became demotivated when sessions were regularly cancelled, or they got out of their normal routine. It was important that participants knew the sessions would run consistently each week.

### Personal barriers

In addition to the session-related factors that affected attendance, participants also mentioned that their attendance was influenced by personal factors. The most common reasons for non-attendance given by participants were:

- **Holidays** – the dips in attendance in May and August (as described above) could be partly attributed to the most popular times for holidays.
- **Illness or injury** - *'I think when you're older, it's mostly going to be illness that stops you. Because the mind doesn't change, the mind wants to do it. But sometimes the body says 'no'. It really is down to your old age ailments sometimes getting in the way.'* (Participant)
- **Medical appointments**
- **Grandchild caring duties** - *'For a lot of people, I think life gets in the way, especially if you are a granny or a grandad and it's school holidays and you are on childcare duties.'* (Participant)
- **Religious festivals such as Ramadan.**

Overall, consistent delivery in terms of the day, time and venue for the session and the number of participants, as well as a warm and positive group culture were key contributors to regular attendance.

### 4.3 Why did some participants stop attending?

As would be anticipated with any activity or programme, not all the individuals who signed up to participate in Walking Tennis maintained their involvement throughout the programme. Some discontinued their involvement temporarily, while others stopped participating permanently. By the end of the Walking Tennis programme, of the total 299 older people who had participated in at least one session, 157 participants had maintained their active engagement, while 141 were classed as 'inactive' as they had not attended a session for 90 days or more.

To explore participants' reasons for disengaging from Walking Tennis, telephone interviews were conducted with 11 older people who had discontinued participation in five of the eight local Age UKs. The length of time that these individuals had played Walking Tennis ranged from one session to eight months.

Overall, these older people were positive about their experience of Walking Tennis. Some indicated they hoped to return to the Walking Tennis sessions in the future, while others had permanently stopped. The reasons given for their discontinuation from Walking Tennis included both individual factors and session-related factors:

### Individual reasons

- **Health problems/illness** – Although participants with a range of health conditions were able to play Walking Tennis, two of the older people interviewed reported ongoing health problems that made it difficult for them to continue their involvement in Walking Tennis sessions. One lady, for example, explained that she became frustrated with the game due to arthritis in her hand: *'I found that I couldn't control the ball...if I can't do it right, I won't do it.'* Another former participant had started taking medication that caused her to lose weight, and as a result, she had limited energy for Walking Tennis and other activities.
- **Injury** – One former participant explained that he had injured his shoulder while participating in another activity, which prevented him from continuing Walking Tennis, although he was hoping to return once his injury had healed. Another individual reported that her injury had affected her confidence in playing Walking Tennis and she had found it too challenging to return:
  - *'I was knocked over playing table tennis and I haven't walked very well since...I couldn't do it.... Nothing was broken, but it seems to have set off osteo-arthritis. And I think it's shaken my confidence as well to go and playing sports.'* (Former participant)
- **Too busy or the sessions clashed with other commitments** – Three of the participants who had discontinued Walking Tennis explained that this was because it did not fit with their other commitments, as the following comments illustrate:

*'It is a sadness to me that I wasn't able to keep going. It was just simply a case of time. It had nothing to do with the people or the whole concept of Walking Tennis – it was just simply that I haven't got enough time.'* (Former participant)

*'It was a real shame because it was a nice group and it was well run. It was for no other reason than life just got too busy.'* (Former participant)

*'Nothing about the tennis itself, I wish I had enough hours in the day, but I haven't!'*  
(Former participant)

Other personal reasons given by older people who had discontinued participating in Walking Tennis included moving out of the area and anxiety, affecting this individual's confidence to leave the house.

One former participant emphasised the range of personal factors that can affect an older person's continued participation in activities such as Walking Tennis: *'One of the things you can take from this is that people have all sorts of things going on in their lives that affect how they respond to things like Walking Tennis. It wasn't just me going along and deciding I didn't like it.'* (Former participant)

Some of the participants who had discontinued their involvement due to personal issues, notably illness, injury or anxiety, were hoping to return to the sessions once they had recovered. Indeed, a few had continued to attend the social activity at the end of the session despite not being able to participate in the physical activity, to maintain their engagement in the group. This was actively encouraged by the project lead and participants in one local Age UK, and it is interesting to note that this was the area with the highest participant numbers.

Returning to an activity after an absence can be difficult, due to a lack of confidence or concerns about exacerbating injuries. One former participant, for instance, explained: *'I was a bit wary of going back...because I've just got a problem that my wrists aren't very strong, and my arms aren't very strong.'* This highlights the need for local Age UKs to consider not only how they can retain participants in the longer term, for example, through adaptations to sessions, but also how they can encourage irregular attendees to return. Participants may need some gentle encouragement to return after an absence, and this could be done gradually, for example, by suggesting that they attend to watch a session and join the refreshments and social activity afterwards. One former participant who returned to the group after a prolonged absence explained how maintaining communication with the group had facilitated her return: *'Because I was still on the WhatsApp group that we set up, I was able to find out what was going on and talk to people.'*

### Session-related reasons

While most participants who had discontinued their involvement in Walking Tennis had enjoyed their experience and had stopped for reasons unrelated to the sessions, a small number raised issues about the sessions that contributed to their discontinuation. These included:

- **Sessions were too structured** – One former participant, for example, would have liked the sessions to be *'less controlled and more self-controlled.'* He found the sessions repetitive and would have liked more opportunity for unstructured game play and *'a bit of fun, knocking around'*.
- **Dislike of the slower pace** – The slower pace of Walking Tennis did not everyone, with one former participant stating: *'It wasn't exhilarating...it's kind of a slow game'*. This point was echoed by another older person, who was frustrated by the slower pace and adaptations:

*'I know I'm elderly, but I'd always played ordinary tennis and I love tennis. But I couldn't just walk. If I saw the ball, I started to run to get it. And they said, oh no, no, you're not to run...and so I felt it wasn't really for me.... I didn't really enjoy it...I just couldn't stop myself running to get the ball.'*

- **Lack of gameplay or competition** – A few former participants were frustrated by the lack of gameplay and competition within the Walking Tennis sessions and consequently felt that they did not have the opportunity to develop their tennis skills.

*'It wasn't quite like you were playing properly, you kept having to get the ball and hitting it over the net, if someone misses then you have to go and get the ball, so it was quite stop start.'*  
(Former participant)

*'I would have liked more game play. We played such short games; I never really felt that I was developing skills. You need to make mistakes and try new things, and I never really felt that there was enough time to consolidate that.'* (Former participant)

- **Too few participants** – One former participant who was involved in some of the early Walking Tennis sessions explained: *'There were so few of us there. I just got a bit fed up with it, and thought, it's not for us, and that was it.'*
- **Changes to the Walking Tennis venue** – In some local Age UKs, groups moved from outdoor courts to an indoor venue in the winter. In a few cases, this new venue was less easily accessible to participants, with one describing the new venue as *'a bit of a journey'*, and this had contributed to her discontinuation.
- **Lack of group cohesion and social interaction** – Although time for refreshments and social interaction was built into the Walking Tennis sessions, two former participants indicated that there had been little opportunity for them to build relationships with other participants. One explained that this was due to how the session was structured, while another felt that the social activity at the end of the session did not encourage interaction among the group:

*'The way it was structured didn't enhance getting to know people because we were allocated who we were playing with. And every time you did an exercise, you moved round one place, so you were with other people. So, you got to be doing things with all the people, but not really for long enough to consolidate anything.'* (Former participant)

*'The clubhouse wasn't very big or well laid out and people were inside and outside, so it wasn't a very coherent experience.'* (Former participant)

It is worth noting that most participants who raised session-related issues dropped out of Walking Tennis early in the programme, when the sessions were relatively new. At this stage, coaches were still developing the session structure and learning the needs and preferences of the older people involved. It may be that some of the issues raised by former participants would have been resolved over time, as the Walking Tennis groups became more established, and the coaches and participants became more confident. A few groups, for example, introduced elements of competition into the sessions, as participants developed their Walking Tennis skills, with some taking part in Walking Tennis leagues and competitions.

## 5. Older people's experiences of Walking Tennis

This section summarises the views and experiences of older people participating in Walking Tennis, including their reasons for joining the Walking Tennis groups and their views on the sessions.

### 5.1 Why did older people decide to join Walking Tennis?

Most of the participants interviewed had not been involved in Age UK activities or services prior to Walking Tennis, indicating that the programme had helped Age UK reach a new client base. They most commonly had heard of Walking Tennis through recommendations from friends or family, or through promotional materials around their local area. However, many participants commented that they were initially unsure how Walking Tennis would work and would have appreciated receiving further information on the game's rules before joining. This was summed up by one participant, who argued:

*'How the hell can you play tennis by walking, because it's a fast game. Seriously, that was the main reason I went along for the first time – it was out of curiosity really. How on earth can you play a really fast game at walking pace?!'* (Participant)

When asked why they had decided to take up Walking Tennis, the participants interviewed gave a range of reasons, which reflected both physical and social factors:

- To try a new activity or sport
- An opportunity to return to tennis
- To improve their fitness and mobility
- To meet new people/social interaction
- To give them routine and purpose

**To try a new activity or sport:** Some participants reported that they were actively seeking a new activity or sport to join to remain physically active. Although they had not necessarily played tennis before, or any other racquet sport, or even participated in sports, the novelty of Walking Tennis attracted them. The novel appeal meant *'it was something completely different'* to the other activities they had taken part in, and there was an attitude among many of the participants that they would *'give it a go'*.

The following quotes reflect the comments from participants about their desire to try a new activity:

*'I used to be very active, then there was COVID and my husband died during COVID. And you fall out of a routine that you've built up over the years...I've tried to do a lot of walking, but it's very easy to make excuses. And I thought, "come on, you've got to do something".'* (Participant)

*'I was looking for something like this, and it wasn't there. I tried badminton, but it was far too much. I tried the tennis club and they're just competitive as heck! I've not a chance of getting up to*

*anywhere remotely their level, so it never worked, so I had to give that up. So, this has been magic.'*  
(Participant)

*'I am 88 and I didn't want to give up all sports. The leisure centre has closed down, so I lost my badminton...and I'd given up tennis, so I just thought it would be some form of exercise.'*  
(Participant)

While many participants were excited by the opportunity to try a new sport, this was a potential barrier to other older adults who had never played tennis or other racquet sports before. One participant living with Parkinson's disease, for instance, stated that *'the idea of playing tennis was terrifying to me. I never played it at school or anything.'* This highlights the importance of providing sufficient information, guidance and reassurance to older people about Walking Tennis and the suitability of the game for a variety of needs and abilities.

**An opportunity to return to tennis:** According to Age UK's monitoring data, 41 per cent of the participants on the programme had previously played tennis but had had to stop. The evaluation interviews with some of these participants revealed that they especially welcomed the opportunity to participate in a sport that they had previously enjoyed. They talked about how their more limited mobility had prevented them from continuing with tennis, as well as the more competitive nature of the game, which they felt they could no longer keep up with:

*'I've always liked tennis. I haven't played for many, many years. And, you know, I thought this was the ideal thing for me, as I'm not as mobile as I was.'* (Participant)

*'I think once you've played tennis, then it's something that you always want to carry on doing, isn't it...My grandson plays for a club...and I suddenly realised I couldn't play with him anymore. He was just too fast on the court. I thought that was the end of my tennis...But because it's walking, you know you find you can actually do it.'* (Participant)

*'I turned 70 and I was looking for something different to do and [Walking Tennis] came up on the Age UK website....it fitted the bill. I loved tennis as a child, I absolutely loved it, and then I took up badminton which I then preferred...so for a long time it was badminton and then, when I retired I went back to tennis but I found I couldn't cope with the running around, so I had to let that go. And then suddenly this popped up and I thought, 'yes that's it, that's the one''* (Participant)

These participants appreciated that Walking Tennis was more adaptable to their needs and mobility levels: *'None of us want to be able to run around anymore, we have dodgy knees and hips...so you just need to be a bit more careful. So, the slower games and rules just fit the bill.'* (Participant)

**To improve their fitness and mobility:** While some participants were motivated to take up Walking Tennis because it was a sport, others were simply looking for an activity that would increase the amount of exercise they were doing and help improve their fitness and mobility. One participant, for example, explained that they had joined Walking Tennis to *'Keep my joints going...help with my mobility. And I have*



*asthma as well, so I was hoping a bit more exercise would help that. I don't want to be a couch potato; I don't want to pile the weight on...so a bit of all sorts really.'* (Participant)

While the physical aspect of Walking Tennis was an important motivator, some participants also spoke of their broader reasons for joining the sessions:

**To meet new people/social interaction:** The social aspect of the Walking Tennis sessions was a key reason that many older adults chose to join the sessions. Some participants reported that they were new to the area, or that they wanted to meet new people, and this social interaction was thought to be particularly important for older adults, especially once they have retired, because they can sometimes become socially isolated: *'It's very easy to retire and disappear off and nobody ever sees you again. So, I wanted some social interaction, and I wanted some physical activity.'* (Participant).

One participant also recognised the potential positive impact of Walking Tennis on her mental health, and this was a key motivator to her joining the sessions:

*'I just recognised that I needed to do more social things and, you know, get out more and, you know, work on my mental health as well.... And I saw the Walking Tennis and I said, 'I'm going to give it a go'. And I've never looked back.'* (Participant)

**To give them routine and purpose:** Some participants were simply looking for an activity that would give them something to look forward to in their week and provide some routine to get them out of the house. One participant, for instance, reported that Walking Tennis was *'something to slot in the diary in the week, to make you get up and get out'*, while another explained that *'Now that I am of that age, it is important to me that I see purpose in life and have things to do and keep fit.'*

While participants had various reasons for wanting to try Walking Tennis, the timing and location of the sessions were key factors in their decision to join. For some, it was important that the Walking Tennis took place in a venue near their home, for both accessibility reasons and to fit in with their caring responsibilities, as one participant explained: *'I want to keep active. I can leave my wife, but I don't want to be too far away if there's nobody else around, and [Walking Tennis] took place not very far from where I live...so that was quite good.'* A few participants also noted that the offer of a free taster session and the 'pay-as-you-play' model also attracted them to Walking Tennis, as they did not have to commit to regular attendance from the outset: *'To start with, when you're unsure about it, to have to sign up for a whole course and pay in advance would put some people off. So, for me, when I started, that was one of the attractions'.* (Participant)

## 5.2 What did participants think of Walking Tennis?

The participants interviewed were overwhelmingly positive about Walking Tennis – they enjoyed the sessions and spoke about the benefits they had experienced from taking part, and this was consistent regardless of participants' previous experience of playing tennis. Participants' comments such as *'it's certainly added to my life'*, *'it's one of the best things I've done'* and *'I absolutely love it...I don't feel that I'm old when I'm playing tennis'* illustrate the positive impact that Walking Tennis has had on many of the participants' lives.

Participants gave their views on a variety of aspects of the Walking Tennis sessions, as summarised below:

- **Fun and relaxed sessions** – Participants noted that they enjoyed the fun and informal nature of the sessions. Participants reported that they smile and laugh throughout the sessions and that they do not take themselves too seriously or worry if they make a mistake or miss a shot. However, they still felt that they were progressing in their tennis skills. As one participant stated: *'It's light-hearted but you are actually learning something'*. Although some participants said that they liked *'the competitive edge'*, others felt that *'the beauty of Walking Tennis is that it's not ultra-competitive'*.
- **Suitable for a range of ages and abilities** – One of the most common views expressed by participants was that they appreciated that Walking Tennis was adaptable and flexible, allowing people to play at their own pace and level, and within their own physical limitations. This was summed up by one participant, who said:

*'I have a lot of health conditions, and it's certainly been suitable for me. Each elderly person knows their limitations and there's nothing with Walking Tennis that says you have to do it for the hour. If you feel you've had enough after 50 minutes, then nobody's going to say you've got to continue. You do your own pace, and you do what you can do.'* (Participant)

Participants referred to Walking Tennis as being *'a real leveller'* and that the modified rules of a softer ball and allowing two bounces meant that it offered *'a more gentle experience'* than traditional tennis:

*'I think it's the fact that it's Walking Tennis that has the appeal, that I know it's within my physical capabilities. I don't have to run and dive and stretch and jump and all that sort of thing as you would with ordinary tennis.'* (Participant)

- **Skilled coach** – The participants felt fortunate to have a trained coach to deliver the Walking Tennis sessions, and they spoke highly of their coaching knowledge and skills, their patience and empathy and their ability to integrate older adults with differing needs and levels of tennis experience. The participants were generally happy with the structure of the sessions, commenting that the coach gave them skills to develop each week and tips on their technique,

and that the coach makes the sessions fresh and interesting: *'It's not doing the same thing week in, week out.'* The following comment was typical of many of the participants' comments about the coaches:

*'I'm just thoroughly impressed by all of them. The way that they...integrate all of us with our different abilities and skills...They're genuinely hands-on, they make everyone feel included, they remember names.... If there's an odd number of players one session, you know, they'll come up with a way to make everyone have, you know, an equal chance of playing. They're a joy to have as coaches, to be honest. They're experienced coaches and they're able to, in a safe way, show us some amazing skills.'* (Participant)

- **Supportive, welcoming atmosphere** – Participants praised the warm and friendly culture of the Walking Tennis groups, which welcomed new members and helped them integrate into the group. This ethos was facilitated by the coach and volunteers, who played a key role in being a welcoming and supportive presence for participants. The social activity also enabled participants to socialise after the session and strengthened the group's cohesion.
- **Social activity** – Participants were particularly appreciative of the social element of the Walking Tennis sessions – the opportunity to relax, chat and make new friends. Many of the participants reported that they were pleasantly surprised by the effort that the local Age UK and/or tennis venue had made to provide refreshments following the session. This included biscuits, fruit and in one local Age UK, a bespoke lunch menu for Walking Tennis participants. This more substantial meal was particularly appreciated, as shown by the following comment: *'I look forward to Mondays, I play tennis and have this food – the lunch – and then I don't have to worry about making dinner now.'* (Participant)
- **Sessions feel safe and well-supported** – Participants appreciated the support of coaches and volunteers in looking after them during the Walking Tennis sessions, and giving them tips on how to stay safe, including not walking backwards, staying on two feet and not reaching too far for the ball. One participant also emphasised that they were grateful that the sessions were organised and supported by Age UK, as this made them feel safer and gave a sense of credibility:

*'We never would have come to this if it hadn't been arranged by Age UK. You don't know if you're going to be made to feel welcome or not; these sorts of places can be a little bit intimidating. Also, it's nice to have someone walking around to check you are going to be okay, it feels safer... someone looking out for you...and making sure you don't hurt yourself or get injured. I don't think other places and groups would be like that if it wasn't with Age UK.'* (Participant)

- **Supportive project lead** – In the main, the local Age UK project leads played a key role in setting up and supporting the groups, although their attendance at the weekly sessions varied depending on their role and other commitments. Some participants praised their project lead as being instrumental to the success of the Walking Tennis groups, particularly when the project lead

maintained regular contact with participants. One participant, for example, explained that the project lead makes everyone feel welcome at the sessions and *'she makes sure everybody is part of the community'*. Another participant felt that the project lead had gone *'above and beyond'* in looking after the participants and checking in on those who were absent:

*'She always contacted you if you didn't come, you know she always rang me and said, are you ok? And then she visited [name of participant], when she didn't come. You know, all these sort of little ways which really made me feel that someone cares.'* (Participant)

- **Delivery in suitable facilities** – Participants were generally positive about the venue where their Walking Tennis sessions were delivered, with positive comments about the tennis and social facilities and, where indoor facilities were available, the ability to play in all weather conditions. As one participant playing in an indoor venue emphasised: *'This is 100% guaranteed. Where it's outdoors, you can forget December, January, and February. And if you go for 3 or 4 months without it, you could break the habit.'* However, some participants commented on the accessibility of the venues, noting limited access to public transport or parking, while others mentioned the temperature (both high and low) and poor lighting or acoustics in some venues. This was most commonly the case when groups moved from an outdoor court to an indoor court for the winter, and participants found it difficult to adjust. One participant, for example, commented on the *'artificial lights...if you're making a stroke, you're often looking up at the light, and it's just not such a nice atmosphere.'* While these participants mostly preferred playing outdoors for *'more freedom and fresh air'* and commented on the restrictions of playing indoors, they were grateful to maintain continuity in their sessions.

## 6. Outcomes of the Walking Tennis Programme

The Walking Tennis programme was widely regarded as a success by the stakeholders involved in delivering, supporting, and participating in Walking Tennis, and a range of positive outcomes were reported – for participants as well as for the wider community. This was the case across all eight local Age UKs, with differing local contexts and a variety of Walking Tennis delivery models. It is worth noting that, while the set-up and delivery of the sessions were particularly challenging in one of the eight local Age UKs, the participants and coaches involved still felt they had benefited from their participation.

### 6.1 Outcomes for participants

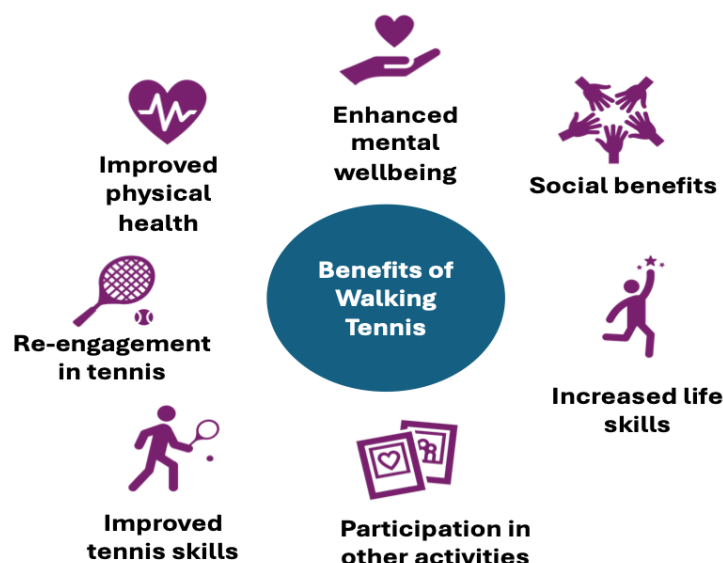
As discussed in Section 5.2, participants spoke highly of the Walking Tennis sessions and felt that they had benefited considerably from their involvement. These benefits were also highlighted by the local Age UK project leads and the coaches and volunteers delivering sessions, who had noticed the impact of the sessions on the attendees. One coach, for example, emphasised the physical and social benefits of the sessions, while another felt that some benefits were intangible, but significant for older people:

*'Their movements seem to be getting a little better.... Whether they're good or bad at tennis, it doesn't really matter because it's all about being on court, getting moving. But also, they get to chat to people...There's a lot of laughter and banter between them.'* (Coach)

*'I think there's probably a few benefits that are just completely intangible that you just don't know how important that is to someone for that hour, hour and a half of a week. It could be absolutely gold dust to somebody.'* (Coach)

There were some unintended outcomes of Walking Tennis, such as minor injuries to participants from falls during sessions or being struck by the ball. However, overall, the outcomes for participants were overwhelmingly positive.

The main benefits of Walking Tennis highlighted by participants are summarised below.



**Improved physical health:** For all Walking Tennis participants, the sessions contributed to an increase in their physical activity levels. Some participants were physically active prior to joining Walking Tennis and were taking part in a range of other sports and activities. However, they noted that Walking Tennis provided a different form of exercise for them:

*'The tennis is good for me because my other stuff isn't really weight-bearing stuff. And I don't really walk because I'm not a great walker now. And so, the tennis is really good for that.'* (Participant)

*'I go to the gym and I swim and do stuff but I find that tennis is something that I didn't think I could ever get back to and now I do feel I can actually, I'm not brilliant by any stretch but I can play a game and I know what I'm doing and I'm enjoying it.'* (Participant)

*'It gets you moving quicker than you would normally....it gets those fast twitch muscles working. We all get sweaty and red so we're doing something.... you get the physical benefit without going to the gym.'* (Participant)

For other participants, Walking Tennis was the only structured physical activity they were engaged in, and the physical benefits were particularly noticeable for them.

Participants across all eight local Age UKs reported a range of improvements to their physical health as a result of participating in Walking Tennis, including increased stamina, improved balance and mobility, enhanced hand-eye coordination, and reduced joint pain. One participant, for example, indicated that they now had *'better movement, better, quicker reflexes.... even walking, I just feel lighter and move better.'* Another stated that the exercise they were doing through Walking Tennis was *'keeping my joints*

*moving. And improving my asthma...And I have actually lost a little bit of weight, and that has helped as well.'*

Improvements to the participants' physical health were also noted by those delivering and supporting the Walking Tennis sessions. One coach, for example, highlighted improvements in participants' stamina: *'It started off where some of them had to sit out, but we very rarely have any sit out now'*. A volunteer at a different local Age UK also noted that two participants with Parkinson's had benefited from the sessions: *'They are improving each and every week – their coordination, their mobility, their confidence'*, which had wider benefits for their lives.

A few participants were recovering from injury or surgery, including heart surgery, and felt that being able to engage in physical activity at their own, slower pace, was assisting their recovery. One participant recovering from a stroke, for example, had been able to re-learn how to play tennis using her non-dominant hand. In another local Age UK, the project lead reported that one participant, who had attended various rehabilitation and pain clinics, felt that Walking Tennis had made the biggest difference to her health.

**Re-engagement in tennis:** For the 41 per cent of participants who had previously played tennis, but had stopped for health or other reasons, Walking Tennis provided them with the opportunity to re-engage with a sport that they had enjoyed. Participants who had previously been tennis club members reported finding tennis too strenuous or competitive as they got older, and welcomed the more relaxed, slower pace of Walking Tennis. This feeling was summed up by one participant who stated: *'That's what it's about. It's people who played in their younger days, they think it's all past them and then they get this opportunity to revive those skills. They get to meet new people, they get out in the fresh air, and you know, it's all so good.'* (Participant)

Other participants had not played tennis since early adulthood, and had enjoyed being able to revive a previous enjoyment of the sport:

*'I used to play tennis before and I used to absolutely love tennis, so it's going back to my teenage years. Although I don't feel a teenager anymore!'* (Participant)

*'For me personally, it's the fact that you are playing the game, you're being competitive. It takes me back sometimes...and you get muscle memory. Incredible! Genuinely, I've not really played, apart from occasionally with the grandchildren, since age 18 or 19. So it was quite a leap to go along, but I took to it straightaway and I'll be honest, I'd love to continue.'* (Participant)

**Improved tennis skills:** Regardless of participants' level of tennis experience, they generally agreed that the coaching they received through the Walking Tennis sessions had improved their tennis skills. This included learning the basics of the sport to improving their technique as the programme progressed:

*'From barely being able to hit the ball, you know, I'm really quite pleased. It's taken a long time, but you know with the visual handicap and my age and never having done it before, I'm very*



*pleased with the standards I'm getting to now - hitting, you know, 85% of the balls and learning new skills all the time.'* (Participant)

*'It's the first time in my life I've ever played tennis and I'm really loving the sessions...We're genuinely learning, you know, from coaches, you know, from the basics to the positioning. I've learned so much in the time that I've been playing....to be able to actually play and know different positions and how to handle the ball, it's just been a great opportunity.'* (Participant)

The coaches and volunteers also observed notable improvements in participants' tennis skills and said that participants had been surprised by the progress they had made, giving them a sense of achievement and independence.

Two local Age UKs had joined a local Walking Tennis league, where participants could play competitively against players from other Walking Tennis groups, while another local Age UK had organised a one-day Walking Tennis festival which included competitions among players from the two Walking Tennis groups.

**Enhanced mental well-being:** In addition to the physical benefits, participants also highlighted a range of mental and emotional benefits associated with participating in Walking Tennis. They reported that the sessions gave them *'a boost'*, made them feel happier, more positive and motivated, helped to reduce their anxiety, and given them confidence to leave the house and try new activities. The following comments are illustrative of the mental benefits reported by participants:

*'It makes me feel great for the rest of the day. It really cheers me up. It makes me feel very positive and I feel good, and I think I'll do a bit more gardening. It really does boost me...Because I've smiled and had a few laughs with people, it just cheers you up and you just feel good in the afternoon and evening.'* (Participant)

*'It's like you've suddenly come alive! It's amazing! It's the best thing ever! It does make you feel good...When you get to a certain age, you think 'Oh can I really do that?' And yes, I can do it!'* (Participant)

*'It's just given me a new lease of life.... other people say "you're looking so bright and alert" and you know they can see. I can feel the physical benefits in my overall health. And you know, I like mental stimulation. I'm not somebody who sits.... and it's not too late to learn. It's never too late to learn.'* (Participant)

One participant highlighted that taking part in Walking Tennis during the winter is even more important than during the warmer months, to help reduce isolation and loneliness during the winter:

*'On those horrible, grey, wet days - to get out for a couple of hours and have a knock about and a chat and a laugh, I think that's even more important in the winter because the winters are dire, aren't they? And there are quite a few ladies who live on their own and actually manage to come.'*

*And they really do struggle to actually want to get out of bed. But you know, they really enjoy it when they're here.'* (Participant)

The Walking Tennis groups have also been a source of emotional support for some participants, for example, by helping to reduce loneliness or social isolation and providing support for participants experiencing bereavement and dementia.

**Social benefits:** The social element of the Walking Tennis sessions was widely regarded as equally, if not more, important than the physical element, and was seen as key to the programme's successful outcomes. One tennis club manager described Walking Tennis as *'the vehicle to support the social side of it'* and stated that *'as much as we like to think they come for all the coaching knowledge, they come because they get on with people and because they have a good laugh with each other.'* This point was echoed by many of the participants, one of whom emphasised: *'It isn't just the playing tennis and the activity...it's kind of meeting with people. It's socialising and when you live on your own, which I do, it's company...It isn't just about playing tennis – it's a social thing.'*

The Walking Tennis groups were described as welcoming and friendly, with a strong sense of camaraderie, companionship, and 'family' within many of the groups. This was particularly evident in the groups where there was a good level of attendance at the social activity following the Walking Tennis session, and where the project lead and volunteers had been proactive in encouraging social cohesion within the group.

Participants, particularly those who live alone or are new to their local area, welcomed the opportunity to meet new people and chat with them following the session. One participant, for example, welcomed the *'companionship.... it's just lovely, it's just like a little club'*. New friendships and social connections were formed that extended beyond the Walking Tennis sessions and led to participation in other physical and social activities. In one group, for example, participants had gone on theatre trips together and were planning a Christmas social event, and they described themselves *'a community of friends'*:

*'We all just like it, we have a laugh, we enjoy it, it's exercise, it's good company. And then we'll sit and have a brew and a natter. It's just lovely, I've made some really good friends - there's a feel-good factor.'* (Participant)

**Increased life skills:** For many older adults, Walking Tennis provided a weekly commitment in their diaries, encouraging them to get up and leave the house, something they may not have otherwise done. One participant, for example, explained that Walking Tennis *'gave me an incentive to get up and out of the house'*, while another described it as *'a reason...something in your week to look forward to'*,

Participants reported that unfavourable weather, illness, a lack of confidence or motivation and anxiety can often be barriers to their participation in activities, and Walking Tennis had helped them gradually overcome some of these barriers. They welcomed the routine and purpose that the Walking Tennis sessions gave them to leave their home and recognised the increased confidence and independence that they had gained, which positively impacted other areas of their life:

*'It gives you a little bit of confidence when you start going on a weekly basis. And particularly if you're not well and you're in the house on your own, you get where you don't want to go out – you're safer in your own home. I think it would be very easy to become insular when you're on your own. We all need company.'* (Participant)

**Participation in other activities:** A significant proportion of the participants interviewed reported that their involvement in Walking Tennis led them to engage in other physical and social activities. This was either because they had heard about other activities through the Walking Tennis sessions, or because they now felt more confident and motivated to try new activities. The following comment from one participant reflects the feedback from participants:

*'Now I like getting out, and I feel more motivated to get out for other things as well. The other groups have been good too – we do the group walk. I'd never met [volunteer name] until tennis, and then he encouraged me to do the bowls, so I do that now.'* (Participant)

New physical activities mentioned by participants included pickleball, Nordic Walking, Walking Cricket, Walking Netball and bowls, many of which were organised by Age UK. A few tennis clubs involved in Walking Tennis delivery had offered reduced membership rates for Walking Tennis participants or created a new membership category for this age group. One tennis club had offered Walking Tennis participants social membership at a reduced rate, and many of the participants had taken this up, becoming actively involved in social activities such as quizzes and fundraising. Other Walking Tennis groups had arranged social and cultural activities to do together. A few of the groups had been given tickets by the LTA to major tennis tournaments, and participants were selected to attend. This experience was greatly appreciated by participants, some of whom had never seen tennis played live before.

## 6.2 Wider outcomes

In addition to the positive outcomes for participants, the Walking Tennis programme has led to a range of wider outcomes for other stakeholders and the local community. The reported outcomes have been grouped below into outcomes for coaches and volunteers, for local Age UKs, and for tennis clubs and other delivery partners.

### 6.2.1 Outcomes for coaches and volunteers

- **Coaches have been upskilled** – Nearly all the coaches involved in the Age UK Walking Tennis programme had not delivered Walking Tennis before, and some had not previously worked with older adults. The programme, therefore, gave them an opportunity to develop new coaching skills and/or work with a new client base. One coach, for instance, described the sessions as a *'win-win for everybody'* because, in addition to the participants benefiting, *'I get loads out of it...it's a completely new experience from the coaching side'*.
- **A sense of reward** – Coaches and volunteers were enthusiastic about their involvement in the programme, describing the sessions as *'a joy to deliver'* and *'one of the most rewarding things I've ever done'*. They enjoyed the interaction and *'banter'* with the older people and were inspired by

seeing them progress, both in their tennis skills and their confidence. Two coaches reported that they were now delivering additional Walking Tennis sessions, outside of the Age UK programme, further expanding provision in the local area.

- **Volunteers have been upskilled** – As with the coaches, the volunteers involved in supporting the Walking Tennis sessions were positive about their involvement in the programme. As well as developing their own tennis skills, some volunteers had received training to support their role, including first aid and defibrillator training, further upskilling them. Others had become involved in volunteering for other Age UK activities because of Walking Tennis.

### 6.2.2 Outcomes for local Age UKs

As well as being an addition to local Age UKs' portfolio of activities aimed at improving older people's physical health and well-being, the Walking Tennis programme had a range of wider benefits for the local Age UKs involved. These included:

- **Expanded client base** – Most of the Walking Tennis participants were new to Age UK and had not previously accessed any of their activities or services. Walking Tennis had, therefore, helped Age UK to reach new clients. These included a younger cohort of older adults who were previously unfamiliar with Age UK or felt they were not old enough to access its activities or services.
- **Increased engagement with other services and activities** – Feedback from participants showed they were pleasantly surprised by the range of activities offered by Age UK, and many reported engaging with other Age UK activities since joining Walking Tennis. This was either following a recommendation from other Walking Tennis participants or from the project lead, who promoted other activities at the Walking Tennis sessions. Some project leads had been proactive in sharing details of their other support services with Walking Tennis participants, leading to increased uptake of services such as benefits advice, home-help, and equipment hire.
- **New and improved partnerships with local partners** – Local Age UKs not only consolidated existing partnerships with local delivery partners through the Walking Tennis programme but also developed new relationships. One local Age UK was working particularly effectively with its LTA County Tennis team, and this partnership was considered a key factor in the programme's success in this area.
- **Enhanced community presence** – As a result of the Walking Tennis marketing and promotion, and the success of the groups, project leads felt that the visibility of their local Age UK had increased in their local community. The Walking Tennis groups commonly included older adults spanning a wide age range, from 50 years to over 80 years, and this had helped challenge perceptions of Age UK as only for the very elderly.
- **Increased volunteer capacity** – Where Walking Tennis groups recruited volunteers to support the sessions, this led to increased volunteer capacity for the local Age UK, as some were new to the organisation and/or subsequently started volunteering for other Age UK activities.
- **Transferable assets** – The LTA provided a bag of Walking Tennis equipment for local Age UKs to use in their Walking Tennis sessions and other activities or settings, and there were reports of this happening. One project lead, for example, reported using some of the Walking Tennis equipment in a dementia group.

- **Increased staff well-being** – Nearly all the project leads enjoyed being involved in the Walking Tennis programme and appreciated the opportunity to see and support the delivery of the sessions firsthand. A few project leads referred to Walking Tennis as one of the most rewarding programmes they have delivered through Age UK and felt that attending the session had helped to improve their own well-being, as the following comment illustrates:

*'I've worked for 10 years for Age UK, and I've done a lot of projects over the years. And I can honestly say without a doubt, this is one of my favourite projects I've done. It's really rewarding, and I'm really happy with it.... All the extra hours you do and all the worrying...it's been one of the best projects I've done...I so love our little Walking Tennis family.'* (Project lead)

### 6.2.3 Outcomes for Tennis clubs and other delivery partners

As discussed in Section 2.2, a range of delivery partners were involved in the Walking Tennis programme at a local level, including tennis clubs, leisure and community centres, and LTA County Tennis teams and Open Court leads. The outcomes reported for these partners included:

- **Strengthened partnerships with Age UK** – The partnerships established between Age UK and local organisations were, overall, considered positive and mutually beneficial. Partners appreciated Age UK's lead role in recruiting participants and setting up and supporting the Walking Tennis groups.
- **Enhanced visibility within the local community** – Tennis clubs reported that the Walking Tennis programme had helped raise the club's profile, especially among older adults, and had helped to break down barriers about the club. This was particularly the case where clubs had welcomed participants to their wider social activities. One tennis club manager explained that *'I think some people think we're an elite club and I think to break that down has actually been quite good, to get people to come in and actually see that we are welcoming.'*
- **Court utilisation during quieter periods** – The tennis clubs acknowledged that the Walking Tennis groups were making use of their courts during their quietest times of the day, thus bringing in income that they would not otherwise have had, as one club manager described:

*'There are certain times of the day where there is no utilisation of courts. So, for me, actually having people on court, I think it's all positive because it's getting the facility used...the courts would have been dead otherwise.... it's better to seem to be busy because actually, that that that also increases potential membership.'* (Tennis club manager)

- **Increased revenue** – In addition to income generated from court hire, in some venues, Walking Tennis has also led to increased catering and membership revenue. A few tennis clubs had recognised these potential additional benefits to the club from the outset and had worked in partnership with the project lead to offer reduced rates or a special social membership package to Walking Tennis members.

## 7. Lessons learned about Walking Tennis delivery

The project leads across all eight local Age UKs were asked to reflect on the lessons they had learned from setting up and delivering Walking Tennis, as well as the factors that seemed to contribute to the programme's successful implementation. Their reflections have been grouped into three areas: organisation, promotion and delivery. This section also incorporates the views of participants, coaches, volunteers, and other stakeholders on the factors that facilitate or hinder successful delivery.

### 7.1 Organising Walking Tennis

- **Sufficient lead-in time for planning and staff time is required** – The complexity of venue arrangements, coach recruitment and marketing and promotion highlighted the need for longer lead-in times. While some groups were able to get up and running quickly through existing partnerships with venues or prior experience in delivering walking sports, this was not the case across all local Age UKs, and some groups were not established until September 2024. The staffing arrangements in each local Age UK also varied, with some having additional staff to support specific aspects of delivery, such as volunteer recruitment and marketing, whereas others did not. Project leads would have appreciated more time for planning and setting up the group and more administrative support, particularly regarding the financial and monitoring aspects of the programme.
- **Having a proactive and collaborative project lead is crucial** – To drive programme delivery and develop strong partnerships with delivery providers. One stakeholder highlighted, as with any programme, having the right people in place is key to successful delivery: *'The big factor is always the right person - not the venue, not the product, not the audience. If you've not got the right person leading it from both sides, it falls over.'*
- **The suitability of venues for older adults needs careful consideration** – Finding a tennis venue with suitable facilities and that is easy for older people to access was key to successful delivery. However, local Age UKs were constrained by the facilities available in their area and did not always find it easy to establish relationships with prospective venues. Project leads would have appreciated further support from the LTA and County Tennis teams to help them source suitable venues for Walking Tennis.
- **Building strong relationships with venue partners creates shared ownership** – Where positive, mutually-beneficial partnerships were established between Age UK and local venues, programme delivery was particularly successful. Setting clear expectations and communication channels between partners is essential for successful collaboration.
- **Transport provision for participants can facilitate engagement** – This was particularly the case for older people with limited mobility or LTHCs, who may not otherwise have been able to participate in Walking Tennis.
- **The timing of the session needs to fit with the routines of older people** – Mid-morning or early afternoon was considered the optimal time, so as not to impact participants' day too much and to fit around lunch and dinner. When sessions were too early or too late in the day, attendance was lower.



- **Support from LTA Open Court Leads and County Tennis teams can support programme delivery and sustainability** – Having the support and commitment of the LTA at a local level and embedding Walking Tennis in County Tennis development plans will facilitate the long-term growth and sustainability of the sport.

## 7.2 Promoting Walking Tennis

- **Promotion should use a combination of methods** – Not all older adults use the internet or social media, so non-digital marketing and promotion are also needed. Marketing should target external networks and locations frequented by older adults (e.g. bowls clubs, GP surgeries).
- **Word-of-mouth is particularly effective but takes time** – Recommendation from other older adults proved to be a particularly effective recruitment strategy, as most of the Walking Tennis groups grew organically through word-of-mouth. However, project leads recognised that this approach takes time. Sharing feedback or stories from current participants in promotional materials can help encourage engagement.
- **Clear information about what a Walking Tennis session involves gives reassurance** – Many of the participants were initially unclear what a Walking Tennis session would involve, and how the modified rules would work, and this may have been a barrier to engagement for some older people. Clear information, preferably in visual form, can help to reduce apprehension or uncertainty among potential participants.
- **Ongoing promotion is needed to maintain participant numbers** – Some drop-off in participant numbers is to be expected over time, and ongoing promotion is crucial for ensuring the sustainability of the groups. One coach explained: *'If all of a sudden that group drops to three or four of them, they can't bounce off each other quite as much and just the whole vibe of it changes. So, you need that core and it can very quickly go one way or the other.'* (Coach)
- **The use of visual imagery in promotional materials is effective** – A few of the project leads were proactive in producing their own visual imagery that they could use in their marketing. This included taking photos or videos of their Walking Tennis sessions and creating video interviews with their participants to show prospective participants that Walking Tennis could be for someone like them.
- **Free taster sessions are a good way of encouraging engagement** – Providing opportunities for older adults to try out Walking Tennis without having to commit to signing up seemed to be effective.
- **Launch events can enhance visibility** – Such launch events were thought to be particularly effective when accompanied by media coverage and when they coincided with major tennis championships such as Wimbledon. Offering refreshments, such as strawberries and cream, added to the occasion and helped engage participants.
- **Make good use of the Age UK brand** – Having the recognisable Age UK branding to promote Walking Tennis can help give it credibility and offer confidence to older adults who are considering attending, as well as to tennis clubs and other venues.
- **Establish relationships with local community groups and venues** – This can encourage participation by older adults from specific target groups. One local Age UK, for example, that was



trying to target Asian women for one of their Walking Tennis groups, partnered with a local community centre frequently attended by Asian women.

### 7.3 Delivering Walking Tennis

- **Flexibility and responsiveness to participant needs underpin the success of the sessions** – This can include adapting session formats and encouraging participants to take part at their own pace. There is not a 'one-size-fits-all' approach for delivering Walking Tennis – it should be designed around the needs, abilities and preferences of the participants in each group. In one local Age UK, for instance, with the highest attendance rates, a few participants with mobility issues took part in only a limited amount of physical exercise but then joined the group for the social activity.
- **Good quality, committed coaches, with a good understanding of the needs of older people, are key** – As well as having strong coaching skills, the interpersonal skills of coaches were also seen as crucial for participant motivation and engagement. Coaches who were fun, patient, and empathetic were particularly well regarded by older adults.
- **Coaches need sufficient information and support to deliver Walking Tennis** – This will help with the recruitment of coaches and build their confidence in delivering sessions. Coaches would benefit from opportunities for sharing ideas with other coaches.
- **Sessions should be fun and relaxed and provide a warm, welcoming and inclusive environment** – Older people may be apprehensive about starting a new activity, and it is important that sessions offer a friendly, safe and supportive environment, particularly for newcomers and those with long-term health conditions. As one coach explained: *'Most of the time, their first thought is a little bit nervous, they are worried they've not done tennis ever before or done it for a long time...As soon as they step foot on the court and realise how we do things and how adaptable and changeable and relaxed and sociable it can be, then they relax.'* (Coach)
- **The social activity is central to participant retention and well-being** – Having a pleasant space that is easily accessible from the courts and having a consistent person to facilitate the social activity were important for building group cohesion.
- **Older adults prefer a flexible, pay-as-you-play model for sessions** – Participants generally prefer flexibility over mandatory, upfront payments or club memberships.
- **Regular volunteer and local Age UK staff presence builds trust and group cohesion** – Volunteers or Age UK staff play a key role in being a consistent support for participants and welcoming new members. Having someone to serve as the primary point of contact for participants and maintaining contact with any participants who miss sessions also helped with engagement and overall attendance.
- **Communication channels help maintain engagement** – Setting up a Walking Tennis WhatsApp group between the project lead and/or coach and participants, enabled changes to sessions to be communicated, facilitated social interaction between participants and boosted engagement.
- **Venues with indoor options sustain engagement through seasonal changes** – Having both indoor and outdoor options was viewed as the ideal scenario, as this enables greater consistency and allows people to play outdoors when the weather permits. As one stakeholder explained: *'If you haven't got the strength to be able to hit through the wind and things like that. And then if the*

*sun's in their eyes, can they cope with the sun? It's just very rare that you could get the right conditions, I would have thought, for them to be able to run it successfully. And then you add into the fact there's always that element of doubt whether it's going to go ahead. You just need that continuity of knowing it's going to happen.'* (Tennis club manager)

- **Consistency in delivery is crucial for maintaining regular attendance** – Participants can be discouraged by changes to the timing or location of sessions, or by frequently cancelled classes. Regular attendance is more likely when delivery is consistent. Having a sufficient guaranteed number of players each week is also important for encouraging regular attendance. Participants need to be confident that if they come along to a session, there will be someone to play against.
- **The optimum group size for the venue needs to be considered** – While sufficient participants are needed to make the group viable (both in terms of cost and play), having too many participants for the courts can mean that some need to sit out, which can affect engagement. It can also be more difficult for the coach to monitor all participants, with implications for health and safety.
- **Health and safety awareness must be emphasised during sessions** – Coaches and volunteers should be provided with guidance on how older people can stay safe on court, and this guidance should be cascaded to participants. One volunteer described their Walking Tennis session as '*an accident waiting to happen*' due to the limited mobility and balance of participants and felt that further precautions were needed.

## 8. Sustainability of the Walking Tennis Programme

The Age UK Walking Tennis programme, funded by the LTA Tennis Foundation for 17 months (May 2024 to September 2025), was designed with an expectation that groups would continue beyond the funding period. Some of the local Age UKs, drawing on experience from similar short-term projects, considered sustainability from the outset in terms of their cost models and delivery approaches. All local Age UKs also received guidance from the Age UK national team during the programme on how they could sustain their groups within and beyond the funding period.

The Walking Tennis programme has demonstrated strong participant demand and, on the whole, has become embedded locally through positive partnerships with local tennis clubs, creating a solid foundation for sustainability. There was strong commitment among all stakeholders to continue Walking Tennis sessions, especially among the participants interviewed. One participant summed up the feedback from others, stating: *'I can't see me ever not playing, unless it closes down! And then we'll set up our own group'*. However, the programme's future depends on securing financial support and on maintaining the commitment of venues and coaches.

### Future involvement of Age UK

In most local Age UKs, project leads were keen to maintain some level of local Age UK involvement in Walking Tennis, and they reported that their local Age UK would continue to provide promotional and signposting support to participants, even where delivery is devolved. At the time of this evaluation report, Walking Tennis sessions were continuing beyond the funding period in all eight local Age UKs, demonstrating the programme's success. While nearly all Walking Tennis groups will continue to be coordinated by local Age UK in broadly the same format, a few will be delivered by the tennis club or by participants themselves. Examples of how the local Age UKs were planning to sustain the Walking Tennis groups included:

- Increasing the cost of sessions to participants
- Sourcing additional funding to cover some of the local Age UK's costs
- Introducing a monthly membership fee for participants
- Negotiating a reduced venue hire cost
- Having a local Age UK staff member deliver sessions, reducing coach costs
- Merging groups (either temporarily over the quieter winter months, or permanently).

### Costing models

Without dedicated funding, future costing models for the Walking Tennis sessions will need to balance affordability with sustainability. In some local Age UKs, the original cost of sessions to participants remained viable for future delivery. However, in other areas, the Walking Tennis sessions had been free or very low-cost to participants throughout the funded programme; therefore, additional funding was needed to cover the future costs of the sessions. Project leads considered alternative cost models to ensure sustainability, with some increasing the per-session cost for participants or introducing a monthly Walking Tennis subscription to ensure a minimum level of commitment. Where possible, this

was done in consultation with current participants; however, there is a risk that new costing models may prove to be a barrier to new or existing participants:

*'I'm not sure memberships are the best thing for the older generation because ultimately, how often are they going to be on court? Once, twice a week? It might not be worth it to them. And also, we've got to take into consideration that they might be one injury away from not playing for six months...So I think taking away those restrictions of memberships would be the best thing.'*  
(Coach)

Three local Age UKs, committed to keeping participant costs as low as possible, had secured small grants to subsidise the Walking Tennis programme in the short to medium term. One local Age UK was also finding creative ways to increase this additional funding, for example, by arranging fundraising activities with participants and the tennis club.

### **Potential future delivery models**

Local Age UKs considered a range of flexible delivery models to reduce the cost of Walking Tennis sessions and ultimately secure their sustainability. Given that a coach-led Walking Tennis model is the most expensive option, local Age UKs explored the feasibility of other delivery models. These included sessions being:

- Participant-led
- Volunteer-led
- A combination of participant-led or volunteer-led, alongside periodic coach input.

While participants and other stakeholders acknowledged the potential financial benefit of reducing coach involvement in the Walking Tennis sessions, the general feedback, especially from participants, was that removing the coaching element would negatively affect the quality of the sessions. The coaches indicated that the participants would be able to lead the sessions themselves if provided with training, support, and the necessary equipment. Indeed, several groups have already reached a stage at which sessions are occasionally self-sustaining, led by participants or volunteers when the coach is unavailable. Furthermore, in one Walking Tennis group in which most participants had previously played tennis, participants were confident to continue as a participant-led group in the future.

Despite this, most participants interviewed felt strongly that the coach played a key role in the success of the sessions and advocated for the continuation of coach-led sessions. Participants described the coach as *'the focal point'* of the sessions and *'the glue...keeping everybody together'*. The general feedback was that participants would not be confident or skilled enough to organise or lead the sessions, and participants cautioned that such an approach could change the group dynamics and potentially lead to disengagement. They also emphasised the importance of their role in teaching them how to play Walking Tennis correctly and safely:

*'The coach really gets us working. I think, you know, we could do it on our own, but it wouldn't be anything like the level that we're doing now. He's actually teaching us to play properly.'*  
(Participant)

*'I don't think it would be quite the same without a coach...it keeps the group together, and I have a feeling that if you tried to organise it without a coach or without a nominated leader, I don't think it would be as good.'* (Participant)

Other stakeholders raised concerns about insurance, logistics and maintaining engagement if sessions moved to a participant-led model, with one volunteer stating: *'They would muddle through without a coach or volunteer, but it could peter out without the motivation of others organising it'*.

Hybrid models of Walking Tennis delivery – participant or volunteer-led sessions, supplemented by occasional coach input – were seen as a practical compromise to delivery. Such models reduced coach costs but maintained some level of coaching and skill development: *'Perhaps once a month or every two months, you could get a coach in to see progress and set some goals...to give them something to aim for'*.

#### **Future involvement of LTA**

Stakeholders also argued that securing commitment from the LTA at the local level and embedding Walking Tennis within County Tennis plans would be critical to the long-term sustainability of the Walking Tennis programme.

## 9. Conclusion and recommendations

This section outlines the main conclusions and recommendations from the evaluation of Age UK's Walking Tennis programme. It is structured to address the main research questions set at the start of the evaluation.

### *Why did older people choose to join the Walking Tennis groups?*

Older people chose to join Walking Tennis for a variety of reasons, reflecting both physical and social motivations:

- **Trying a New Activity or Sport:** Many participants sought a new way to remain physically active. The novelty of Walking Tennis attracted individuals who had not played tennis or other racquet sports before, as well as those who simply wanted to "give it a go" and try something different.
- **Returning to Tennis:** Some participants had previously enjoyed tennis but had to stop due to limited mobility or the competitive nature of traditional tennis. Walking Tennis offered a more accessible and adaptable way for them to return to a sport they loved.
- **Improving Fitness and Mobility:** Older adults also participated to increase their exercise levels, improve mobility, and, in some cases, manage a long-term health condition. The slower pace and modified rules made it suitable for those with physical limitations.
- **Social Interaction:** The opportunity to meet new people and avoid social isolation was a key motivator. For some, joining Walking Tennis provided valuable social contact and supported their mental health and well-being.
- **Routine and Purpose:** Participants appreciated having a regular activity to look forward to, which gave structure to their week and a sense of purpose. This was especially the case for those who were bereaved, long-term retired, or had spent years supporting others.
- **Accessibility and Flexibility:** The timing and location of sessions, proximity to home, and flexible payment options (such as free taster sessions and 'pay-as-you-play') facilitated participation in Walking Tennis without a long-term commitment.

In summary, older adults joined Walking Tennis to stay active, reconnect with a sport they enjoyed, improve their health, meet new people, and add structure and enjoyment to their lives – all in an accessible and supportive environment.

### *What did older people think of Walking Tennis?*

Overall, older people found Walking Tennis to be a highly enjoyable, inclusive, and supportive activity that improved their well-being and social connections. Older people who took part in the sessions were overwhelmingly positive about it. Indeed, many participants reported that Walking Tennis added value to their lives, describing the sessions as enjoyable, fun, and beneficial, regardless of their prior tennis experience.

There were some notable aspects of the Walking Tennis sessions reported by participants:

- **Fun and relaxed atmosphere:** Participants appreciated the informal, light-hearted nature of the sessions, which allowed them to enjoy themselves without pressure or fear of making mistakes. While some enjoyed a bit of competition, most valued the non-competitive, supportive environment.
- **Inclusive and adaptable:** Walking Tennis was praised for being suitable for a wide range of ages and abilities. Participants liked that they could play at their own pace and within their physical limitations, making it accessible even for those with health conditions.
- **Skilled and supportive coaching:** The presence of knowledgeable, patient, and empathetic coaches was highly valued. Coaches were commended for making everyone feel included and for keeping the sessions fresh and interesting.
- **Welcoming and inclusive ethos:** The social aspect was a significant highlight. Participants felt welcomed and enjoyed making new friends, with social activities and refreshments after sessions, strengthening group cohesion.
- **Safe and well-supported environment:** Participants felt safe due to the guidance of coaches and volunteers, as well as the credibility of an organisation such as Age UK. This support helped reduce feelings of intimidation and increased confidence in joining the sessions.

### *Why did older people who attended regularly continue to do so?*

Older adults are likely to attend Walking Tennis sessions regularly because the activity offers a range of different appealing features. These factors are considered part of the 'key ingredients' for successful delivery and regular attendance:

- **Sessions are adaptable and pitched at the right level:** Walking Tennis sessions have been delivered across a range of venue types, and their adaptability has helped successfully engage older people with a wide range of abilities.
- **It offers a positive experience:** The sessions are described as fun, enjoyable, and beneficial, creating a positive association that encourages repeat attendance.
- **It provides social fulfilment:** Walking Tennis provides meaningful social interaction, helping participants build friendships and avoid isolation. The welcoming ethos and group activities foster a sense of belonging, which is a strong motivator for regular attendance.
- **Sessions are delivered in a supportive environment:** Skilled and empathetic coaches, along with a non-competitive and adaptable format, make participants feel included and supported. This environment helps individuals overcome barriers, such as limited mobility or lack of confidence, thereby facilitating sustained engagement.
- **It supports older people's health and well-being:** The sessions offer a manageable way to stay physically active, improve mobility, and support mental health. For many, the health benefits are a key reason to maintain regular participation.
- **It gives older adults a sense of purpose:** Having a regular activity provides structure and something to look forward to, which is especially valuable for those who are retired or seeking a new purpose in their daily lives.



## ***What prevented those not participating regularly from doing so?***

### ***Adults who attended regularly***

Attendance at Walking Tennis sessions was generally strong, but there were occasional dips due to both session-related and personal barriers. Session-related issues included coach unavailability, unfavourable weather conditions, venue-related problems, and changes to the day or time of sessions. These factors sometimes led to cancellations or made it difficult for participants to attend consistently.

On a personal level, participants cited holidays, illness or injury, medical appointments, and grandchild caring duties as common reasons for missing sessions. For older adults, health issues were particularly significant, as physical ailments could prevent attendance even when the desire to participate remained strong.

Despite these barriers, proactive measures, such as maintaining contact with participants, providing transportation, and fostering a positive group culture, helped to encourage regular attendance. Consistency in scheduling and sufficient player numbers also contributed to higher participation rates.

### ***Adults who ceased attendance altogether***

Both personal and session-related factors contributed to older people ceasing their involvement in Walking Tennis altogether. There were sometimes interconnected factors, rather than a single cause, that influenced whether older people continued to participate in Walking Tennis.

Health and physical limitations were a significant barrier; many participants faced ongoing health issues, illness, or injuries that made it difficult or impossible to keep attending sessions. For some, the fear of aggravating an injury or a lack of physical confidence after an absence further discouraged their return.

Competing priorities and life circumstances also played a role. Some individuals reported that their schedules were too busy or that other commitments conflicted with the Walking Tennis session times.

The structure and experience of the sessions themselves also influenced participation. While many enjoyed the sessions, some found them too controlled or repetitive, wishing for more unstructured play and fun. Others were frustrated by the slower pace of Walking Tennis, especially those who had previously played regular tennis and missed the excitement and competition.

Social and group dynamics were another important theme. For some, limited opportunities for social interaction or a lack of group cohesion reduced their motivation to attend. Small group sizes or a weak sense of group identity made the sessions less engaging.

Finally, practical barriers such as accessibility also affected participation. Changes in venue, particularly moves to less accessible locations, discouraged some from continuing with Walking Tennis.

***What are the factors local Age UKs and other organisations need to consider when organising, promoting and providing Walking Tennis for older people?***

The primary benefit of the Walking Tennis programme is its flexibility; sessions can be held in various venues and tailored to the needs of different groups. This adaptability has enabled successful delivery across all participating areas. Indeed, as described in the report, there is no single 'one size fits all' model because of the uniqueness of each Age UK area, venue type and the needs of the older adults who joined the sessions.

Table 2 below summarises the most important factors identified in the evaluation that are key to organising, promoting, and delivering Walking Tennis sessions. It is recommended that Age UK national and local Age UKs consider these factors for the future delivery of Walking Tennis for older adults.

**Table 2: Factors for consideration when organising, promoting and providing Walking Tennis**

	<b>Factors that need to be considered by local Age UKs</b>	<b>Factors that need to be considered by other organisations e.g. tennis venues and local partners</b>
<b><i>Organising Walking Tennis</i></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Adequate lead-in time, of approximately three to five months, is needed to -with the tennis venue to arrange set-up and delivery of sessions, volunteer and coach recruitment.</li> <li>• Consider the best time to launch Walking Tennis sessions, for example, in the Spring, when the weather is more favourable, or to coincide with major tennis championships.</li> <li>• Recruit volunteers who will demonstrate enthusiasm towards the tennis sessions and provide support and encouragement to participants.</li> <li>• Develop partnerships with local venues and demonstrate the mutual benefit that can be achieved through Walking Tennis.</li> <li>• Focus on building a strong relationship with the staff who run Tennis clubs or other venues.</li> <li>• Set clear and realistic expectations regarding the Walking Tennis sessions and the participants' needs.</li> <li>• Consider how sessions can be tailored to specific audiences who would gain the most from the Walking Tennis sessions.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify how the Walking Tennis programme can be linked in with other services locally that work with older adults and signposting to Walking Tennis can take place e.g. prevention pathways, long-term condition early intervention care pathways.</li> <li>• Determine how Walking Tennis can help to support local health and well-being needs and priorities that have been identified amongst older residents.</li> <li>• Link in with local services for older people that support the uptake of physical activity to address loneliness and isolation and low-level anxiety and depression, for example a Social Prescribing service, well-being service or public health lifestyle services offer.</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have a primary point of contact for participants and for the coach, volunteers and tennis venue.</li> </ul>	
<b>Promoting Walking Tennis</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use of the Age UK brand as a trusted and credible provider.</li> <li>• Key messages that would resonate with different groups of older adults, including those who have never played, who are now struggling to play, who may be interested in re-visiting tennis after many years.</li> <li>• Relatable images on promotional material</li> <li>• Use a variety of promotional formats including printed marketing at a range of locations attended by older adults.</li> <li>• Using word of mouth and existing places to promote Walking Tennis.</li> <li>• Use key messages to engage around the combination of fitness, socialising and it being something new to try (novelty aspect).</li> <li>• Offer a 'taster', non-commitment approach for those who are new.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consider how the Walking Tennis programme can help to recruit new members into the club.</li> <li>• Consider how the Walking Tennis programme can be used as an additional funding stream for the club.</li> <li>• Offer a main point of contact for the participants and Age UK.</li> </ul>
<b>Delivering Walking Tennis</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A welcoming venue with adequate space to deliver the Walking Tennis – tennis club, centre or community centre.</li> <li>• A venue that can continue to deliver sessions in all seasons or have an alternative venue for bad weather.</li> <li>• Employing a tennis or racquet coach who also has skills to support and enthuse older people.</li> <li>• A volunteer to support the delivery and engage older people.</li> <li>• Place value on the social activity after each session; provision of hot drinks or a meal afterwards.</li> <li>• Be flexible towards the participants' needs and energy levels at the sessions.</li> <li>• Ability to adapt the delivery of the sessions depending on needs and level of the group.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Understand that initial take-up may be slow and attendance will fluctuate.</li> <li>• Be flexible about times that the Walking Tennis sessions can be delivered at the venue.</li> <li>• Give easy access to, and provision of, additional facilities to support the Walking Tennis Groups such as accessible toilets, parking, easy transport links, an indoor space to socialise afterwards.</li> <li>• Support with the social activity afterwards e.g. a dedicated space, subsidised or discounted food and drink.</li> <li>• Creation and offer of affordable, flexible 'social' membership, block course offer or 'pay and play' options.</li> <li>• Strive to continue Walking Tennis in all weathers.</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ensure the health and safety measures are visible and in place, so older people safe and confident during the sessions.</li> <li>• Work with the participants as a group to promote group cohesion.</li> </ul>	
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### *What needs to be considered to ensure Walking Tennis is sustainable after the project funding has finished?*

The main recommendations to ensure the Walking Tennis groups are sustainable after project funding ends are outlined below.

- **Work with tennis clubs to create an affordable membership or pay-as-you-play option specifically for older adults** – The low cost of sessions has made Walking Tennis highly appealing and accessible for older adults. It would be important to continue this approach and consider how the sessions can remain affordable beyond the funding period. Tennis venues could offer a pay-and-play model, reduced membership, or a block course paid for periodically.
- **Source low-cost, accessible venues** – As Walking Tennis sessions are highly adaptable and can be delivered in various spaces, it may be possible to consider other venues that offer lower-cost options for older people, such as a local leisure centre or community centre. This could offset the higher costs associated with using a tennis centre or club.
- **Work with County Tennis teams to embed Walking Tennis in County Tennis plans** – This will ensure that multiple stakeholders take responsibility and ownership of Walking Tennis at the local level, thereby improving the likelihood of sustainability and future growth.
- **A toolkit for venues and coaches** – Walking Tennis could be delivered independently by venues with qualified, registered coaches once LTA funding ends. A toolkit for venues and coaches who may wish to take on Walking Tennis without the involvement of Age UK. The toolkit could show the benefits of Walking Tennis, particularly for tennis venues, in terms of income, membership, and facility use during quiet times. Whilst this is a potential approach, the Age UK brand is significant among older adults, and there could be a partnership approach where this is supported by Age UK in some way. The LTA brand and partnership would also enhance the programme's credibility with older people and venues.
- **Provide opportunities for volunteers to train to lead sessions** – Some sessions could transition to volunteer-led models in the future to reduce costs. Age UK and LTA could provide opportunities for volunteers, particularly those linked to tennis clubs, or with previous tennis or fitness experience, to train as Walking Tennis 'activators' or facilitators, with a specific focus on working with older adults.
- **Build links with other organisations that work with older people** – Each local area will likely have an umbrella organisation that supports community and voluntary sector organisations. It would be helpful to identify how the Walking Tennis programme can link with other local services that work with older adults, and how signposting to Walking Tennis can sustain and increase participant numbers. It would also be beneficial to make links with local services for older people

that support the uptake of physical activity to address loneliness and isolation and low-level anxiety and depression, for example, Social Prescribing services and well-being services. This will enhance the scalability and replicability of the Walking Tennis programme in both existing and new areas.



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