



East Lothian *Walkfest*

22 August – 1 September 2026

Report

A message from the Steering Group

It is hard to believe that WalkFest26 marked the *fifth* East Lothian Walking Festival! Since its launch in 2022, we have continued to develop its programme and reach, while retaining the original core commitment to making walking accessible, enjoyable and relevant to people across East Lothian.

Our Festival aims not simply to provide opportunities to go for a walk, but to encourage people to become more active, discover new places, connect with other people and experience the many benefits that walking can bring to physical and mental wellbeing.

WalkFest26 built on the experience of previous years by offering a varied programme of walks and activities, including opportunities to explore local history and heritage, discover East Lothian's natural environment, try new activities and develop confidence in walking and outdoor recreation. We are delighted that the feedback from participants suggests we have managed to do just that.

As the Festival enters its sixth year, this feels like an appropriate time to take stock of what we have achieved, identify what has worked particularly well and what we can improve on, so that Walkfest can continue to deliver for all its future participants.

Maggie, Elaine, André and Hilary

The WalkFest26 Steering Group



1. Festival aims and objectives

Following on from previous years, WalkFest26 continued to build on the East Lothian Walking Festival's core aim of promoting walking as a way of enhancing health, wellbeing, connection and sustainability.

We recognise that our programme of organised walks and activities provide multiple benefits. These include -

- encourage people to become more physically active.
- help people discover and use local paths and routes.
- increase awareness of local history, heritage and natural environments.
- provide opportunities to meet other people and strengthen social connections.
- build confidence among people who may be less experienced walkers.
- encourage people to explore places they might not otherwise visit.
- provide opportunities to try different types and levels of walking.
- contribute to more inclusive and connected communities.

The Festival's objectives therefore remain:

To contribute to healthier, better-connected communities

To ensure inclusivity and accessibility for all

To promote sustainability



2. WalkFest26 at a glance

Festival dates	22 August – 1 September
Scheduled walks/events	28
Cancelled	1
Recorded Festival attendance	232
Bookable places	352
Initial bookings made	321
Bookings at start of Festival	285
Attendance as % of available places	66%
Attendance as % of final bookings	81%
Participant feedback responses	63
Walks represented in feedback	21

The Festival again demonstrated that there is strong demand for free, varied and locally based walking opportunities. Although this year's smaller programme (in terms of available places) resulted in lower number of participants than in 2025, it remained highly subscribed, with 321 initial bookings for 352 available places with many of the walks operating a waiting list for returned or cancelled tickets. In addition, Walkfest26 received the highest number of feedback responses, demonstrating participants' willingness to engage following their walking experience.

3. The programme

Our varied programme is deliberately designed to appeal to people with different and wide-spread interests, experience and abilities.

The programme included opportunities to:

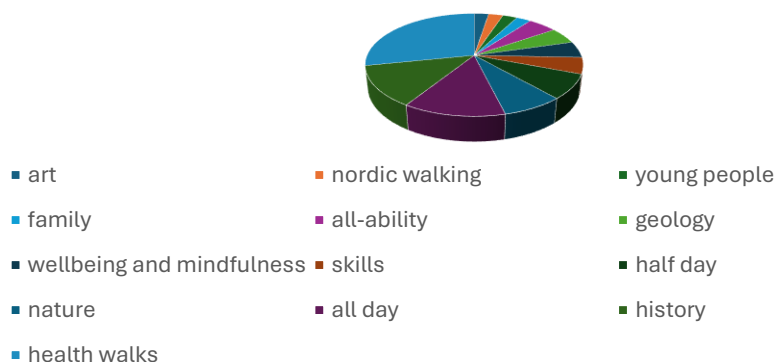
- engage with local history and heritage
- enjoy nature and wildlife
- explore East Lothian's varied coast and countryside
- learn more about local geology and what makes East Lothian special
- develop confidence and skills
- sketch
- try Nordic walking;
- promote positive wellbeing and mindfulness
- enjoy woodland activities
- enjoy all-ability and accessible walks
- explore family activities in local woodland
- provide a young people only event - night-time bat-detecting

We are delighted that most of our programme is delivered through the continuing support of existing partners. While keeping the programme fresh, some of the walks they provide have become very popular 'staples' in the Festival programme. This year we were also able to welcome three new partner organisations. Their additions (Birds on the Move, Hillwalking for Beginners and GetOut In the Woods) to the programme did much to help the Festival widen its appeal even further.

The range of activities reflects a key feature underpinning the success of Walkfest: that 'going for a walk' can be, but is not always, an end in itself. It is also a way to connect with nature, explore landscapes and local heritage, discover a sense of place, feel part of a community and enjoy new experiences. By offering a diverse programme of walks and activities, Walkfest creates opportunities for people with different interests, abilities and motivations to discover the many benefits of walking.

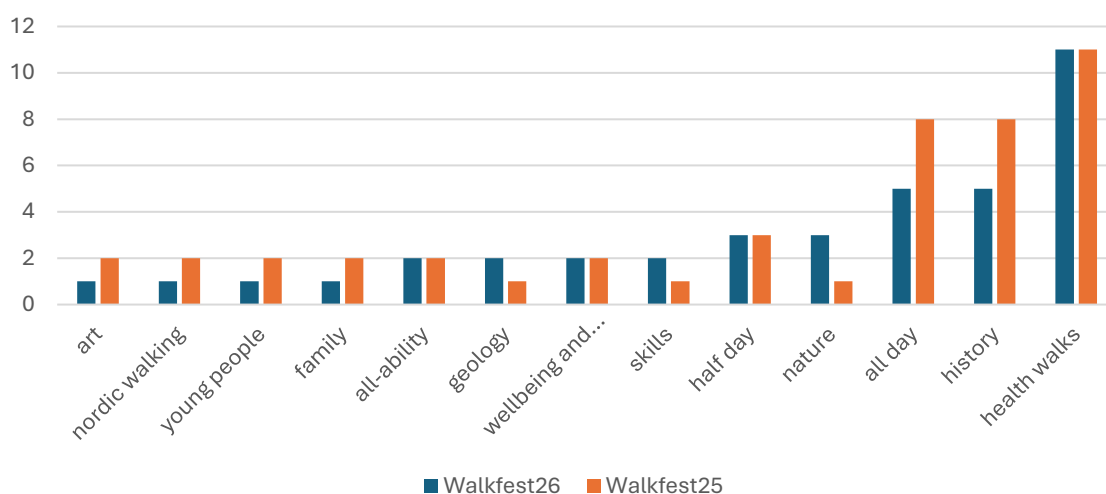


Walkfest26 programme



For interest, a comparison between Walkfest25 and Walkfest26 programmes shows that despite the smaller number of walks on offer this year, there has been little impact on the breadth of the events on offer.

Walkfest26, Walkfest25 Programme Comparison



4. Participation

The Festival attendance records show 232 participants across the bookable programme.

The Festival offered 352 bookable places. There were initially 321 bookings, reducing to 285 updated bookings as tickets were cancelled or returned. Final attendance was 232.

This means that:

- 91% of available places were initially booked.
- 81% of places were booked following updates/cancellations.
- 66% of all available places were ultimately filled.
- 81% of final bookings resulted in attendance.

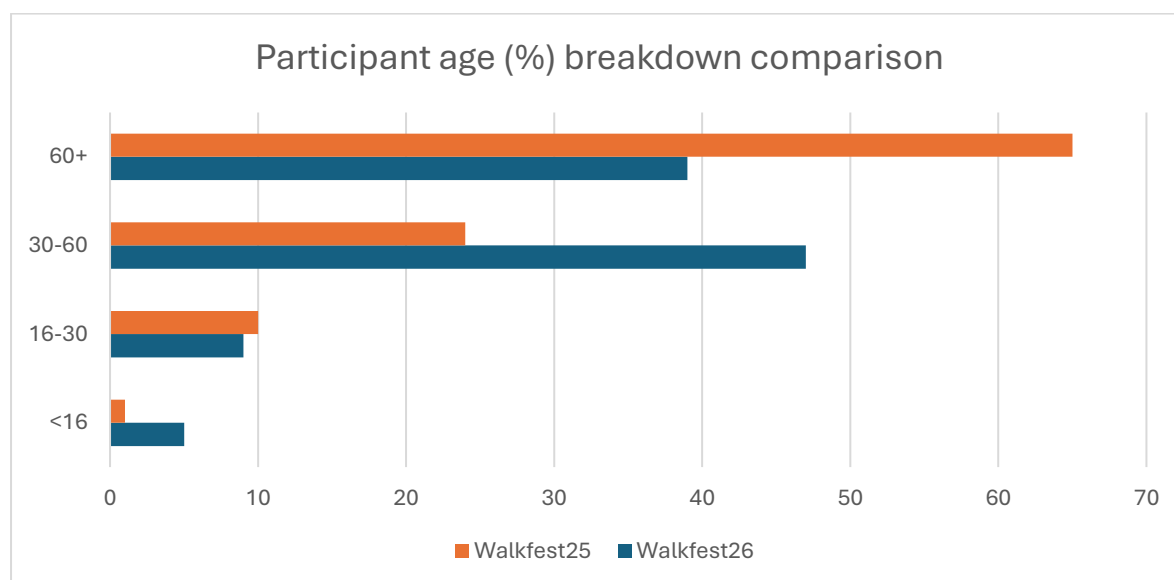
The reduction from initial bookings to actual attendance is therefore considerably smaller than it first appears. The Festival's efforts to allow tickets to be returned and places to be reallocated appear to have helped reduce the impact of no-shows although this still remains an issue for future Festivals.



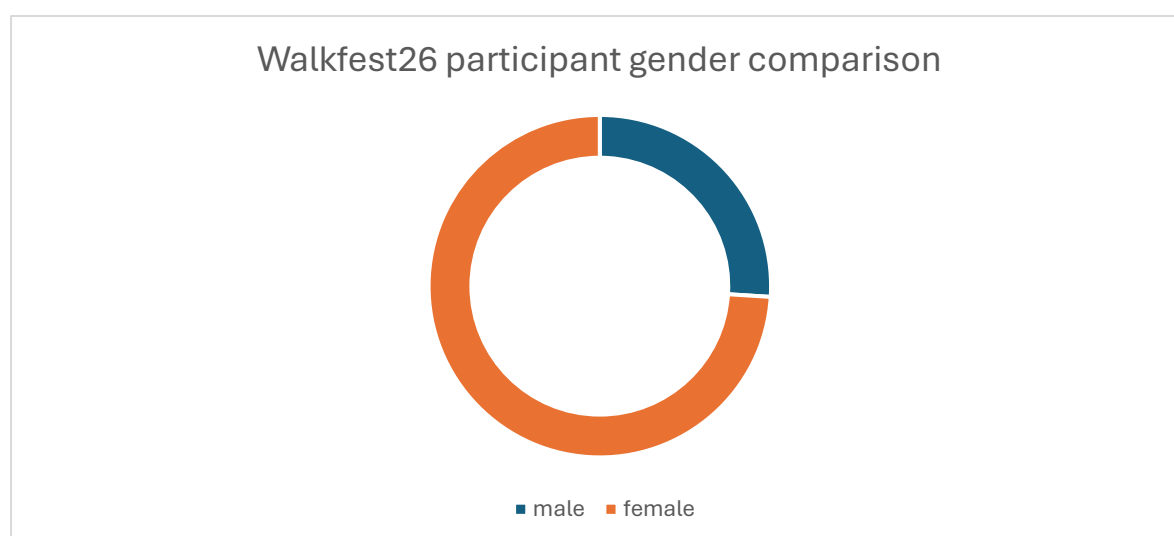
5. Who took part?

Demographics

The demographic analysis was based on information gathered from walk leaders and/or Festival ‘meet & greet’ volunteers. Gender was also recorded for 229 participants, while age information was available for 223 participants.



This year there appeared to be a significant difference in the participant age profile. It is important to note however, that this data is gathered on a ‘best estimate’ basis and not asked for directly therefore cannot be assumed to be wholly accurate. That said, it does indicate that the Festival is attracting participation across all age ranges but also, there is a need to gather relevant and accurate data.



This shows a similar situation to previous years where there is a substantial female majority. This does suggest that further work may be needed to establish why male participation is so low and what changes could be made to the programme to achieve a better balance.

This raises an interesting question for future programme development: how can the Festival continue to broaden participation among men and younger adults without losing the welcoming, inclusive character that existing participants clearly value?



New and returning participants

A request for feedback was made at the end of each walk and also sent through participant and newsletter mailing lists. There were 63 responses.

The feedback survey provides encouraging evidence that WalkFest is both retaining existing participants and reaching new audiences.

Of the 63 respondents:

- 34 were returning participants – 54%
- 29 were attending for the first time – 46%

It suggests that the Festival is developing a regular audience while continuing to introduce new people to walking opportunities in East Lothian.

The geographical spread was also encouraging:

- 22 respondents were local residents.
- 29 travelled 10–20 miles.
- 12 travelled more than 20 miles.

The Festival therefore has an audience extending beyond the immediate communities in which individual walks take place.

Participant feedback, in their own words

The response to WalkFest26 was overwhelmingly positive. There were 63 responses to the request for feedback, covering 21 different walks.

Overall rating

The vast majority of participants gave walks and leaders the highest possible ratings giving an average walk quality score of 4.9 out of 5, while the average leader rating also 4.9 out of 5. This is particularly significant given the range of experiences on offer and the variety of organisations and individuals involved in delivering the programme. It demonstrates the quality of the Festival's walk leaders and the value participants place on their enthusiasm, knowledge and ability in providing safe, memorable and enjoyable experiences.

Walking with others

The welcoming nature of the groups was often mentioned with people commenting on how enjoyable it was to “meet new people” and be “reminded of how good walking and group activities are”. The social aspect of the Festival was highlighted by one respondent when they said, “I am confident I will always get a warm welcome and will have plenty of opportunities to chat to people in the group”. This is echoed by another who commented “I am not a naturally outgoing person but I found that was ok. I actually enjoyed walking with other like-minded people”. The youth worker who attended the Nighttime Explorer walk also noticed how the activity worked on a social level too “It was lovely to see young people from across East Lothian come together and get to know one another”.



Wellbeing

The positive benefits of spending time in nature on health and wellbeing are well established. We asked participants about their experience.

Of the 56 people who answered:

- 35 rated their experience 5 – transformative
- 12 rated it 4 – meaningful
- 7 rated it 3 – moderate
- 2 rated it 2 – limited



Highlights included

“hearing the sound of the waves as we arrived at the coast”

“the delicious brambles I was eating all along the way”

“the opportunity to switch off, while we were outdoors, and destress”

Learning and discovering

The majority of respondents (81%) stated that they had learned something new during their walk. Some aspects that were specifically mentioned were

- Prestonpans' industrial history.
- local geology.
- birdlife at Aberlady Bay.
- Bronze Age settlements.
- the history of St Baldred's Way.
- local heritage more generally.

One respondent stated that they, “thoroughly enjoyed using my sketchbook as an integral part of my walk”. A participant on the Nighttime Explorers walk also shared their enthusiasm for what they had experienced during their activity, “doing the bat detecting was so cool, I really want an echo locator now so I can go myself to hear all the different bats”.

Taken together, this demonstrates that walking is an effective way of connecting people with the county's history, landscape and natural environment, helping people to experience places rather than simply being told about them.



Participants also talked about how the Festival had provided opportunities for them to discover, or in some case rediscover, the countryside. One respondent called this “New paths to familiar places.” Another commented, “you often walk without paying much attention to your surroundings, having someone point out interesting locations, animals or plants & giving an explanation is wonderful. You also discover so many incredible places you probably just walked past previously and didn’t know existed.” A further participant summed this up by commenting that taking part in Walkfest had resulted in them “falling in love with East Lothian all over again!”

Building confidence

It is one of the stated aims of Walkfest that our programme can help participants build self-confidence. We asked if taking part in the Festival had had such an effect. Just over half (56%) of respondents reported increased confidence with almost a third saying they felt much more confident. This is an important finding as it suggests that for a significant proportion of participants, the Festival is helping to remove some of the uncertainty associated with trying a new route, joining a group or tackling a different level of challenge. Some of their comments are below

“...gave me confidence to do something I wouldn’t do on my own”

“getting to know and feel confident about my local area and where to walk”

“stepping out of my comfort zone, such a successful and enjoyable experience”

“I went swimming in a reservoir. I can do new things and enjoy them”

The Festival, therefore, has a role as a gateway to longer term walking and other outdoor activities and to continue to have an effect long after the event is over. It appears that this may be the case for at least one of our respondents who commented, “It inspires me to walk more, keep fitter, join new community groups and meet new people”. And another who said, “A guided walk with others makes it easier to try something new when I’m on my own”.



The feedback survey asked participants if they felt inspired to try something new and if so, what might that be. Their responses were

	Responses
Explore new places	14
Meet new people through walking	10
Walk more often	9
Take on a longer/harder walk	8
Walk with a new group	7
Try a different type of walk	6
Try another outdoor activity	5

This provides further evidence that the Walkfest programme can encourage more people to be more active both during and beyond the festival dates.



6. Administration and booking arrangements

Walkfest once again used Citizen Ticket as the booking agency. It is the platform used by other events in East Lothian e.g. Fringe By The Sea, therefore it is familiar to many people across the county and beyond. It provides a free service to organisers of events that are free of charge with only minor limitations on functionality.

Through the feedback survey, the booking system was one of the areas identified by participants where there was room for improvement.

Of the 63 survey respondents:

- 48 (76%) said booking was easy.
- 10 said it was somewhat easy.
- 5 said it was not easy.

Several participants specifically mentioned difficulties with the Citizen Ticket system, particularly when cancelling or returning tickets. This follows on from a similar situation during Walkfest25. Efforts were made this year to make information on how to cancel clearer and more readily available but clearly more work requires to be done in this area.



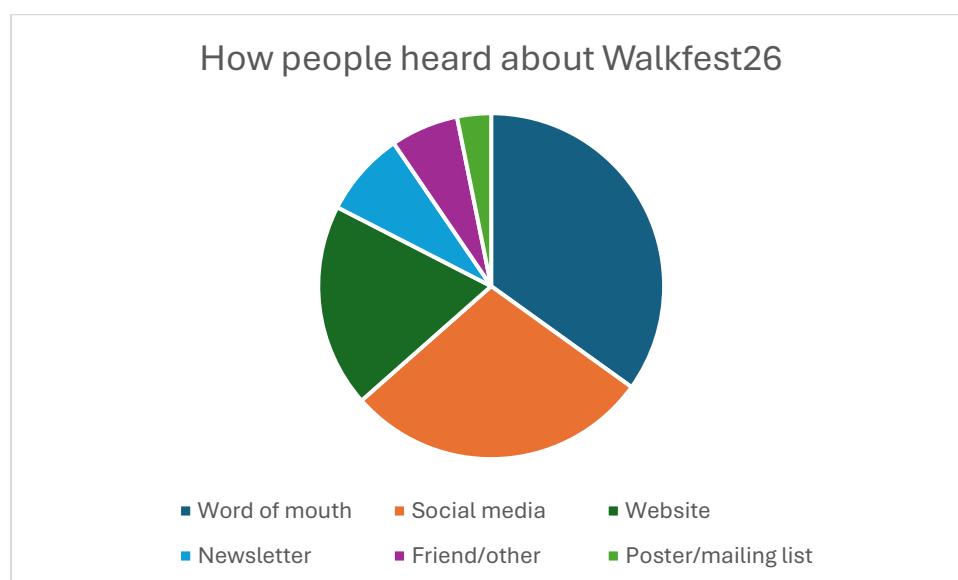
7. Promotion

The Festival continues to maintain a strong partnership with Mobomedia, a local company responsible for updating both the design and content of our website. Their work ensures that the site remains fresh, engaging, and professional.

This year, social media activity was again coordinated by Steering Group member Elaine Craig, whose attention-grabbing posts and updates have significantly raised the profile of the Walking Festival. Facebook following has continued to grow and now sits at 1.6k (as of October 2026).

Our newsletter subscription feature, introduced on the website in 2025, now has 444 email subscribers. In addition, through booking agency Citizen Ticket, there is access to contact details for previous ticket buyers who have opted in to receive marketing communications.

Responses to the feedback survey painted an interesting picture



The fact that 35% heard through word of mouth is particularly positive. It suggests that participants value their experience sufficiently to recommend the Festival to others.

Social media was also an important channel, accounting for 29% of responses.

The newsletter, however, reached only 8% of respondents, suggesting that there may be scope to make better use of the existing mailing list, particularly for early information and reminders.

8. Walk leaders and volunteers

Walkfest would not be possible without the commitment and enthusiasm of its walk leaders, both volunteers and professionals, as evidenced by the consistently high ratings given through participant feedback, and the many others who support the Festival in a variety of ways. Their time, skills and contributions are fundamental to its success and have helped shape the distinctive character that makes Walkfest so special.

It's important to note that taking part can also bring benefits to those who lead walks and volunteer. For some organisations, the Festival provides an opportunity to raise awareness of their work and attract new members; for others, it has been a catalyst for developing new walks and events. Individuals also have the opportunity to learn new skills, share their knowledge and experience, and connect with others who share their interests. In this way, Walkfest creates opportunities for everyone involved to benefit from being part of the Festival.

Huge and sincere thanks to all our partner organisations for their continued support.

Changes	Long Distance Walking Association	Scottish Ornithologists' Club
East Lothian Countryside Rangers	Lost Haddington	Team Nature
East Lothian Museums	NBC Community Connections	Walks Upon A Time
East Lothian Ramblers	North Berwick Youth Project	WanderWomen Scotland
Fantoosh Sketching	Over the Scottish Hills	The Woodland Trust
GetOut! Outdoor Learning	RNIB	Venturing Out CIC
Hiddentoun Nordic Walking		Wilder Outdoor Adventures



The Festival's approach of having a visible meet-and-greet person at walks also helped provide a focal point for participants, supported attendance checking and provided a point of contact for last-minute issues.

9. Sponsors

East Lothian Walking Festival is committed to offering a diverse programme of walks and events that are accessible to as many people as possible. Keeping the majority of our activities free of charge helps remove financial barriers and encourages people of all ages and abilities to discover the many benefits of walking.

Delivering a festival of this scale is only possible thanks to the generous support of organisations that share our vision of improving health and wellbeing, encouraging people to enjoy the outdoors, and connecting communities.

We are extremely grateful to our sponsors and supporters:-

[CWP Energy](#) (was Community Windpower) whose support enables us to provide transport for selected festival events, making more walks accessible to a wider range of participants.



CWP Energy

[East Lothian Council](#) which provides funding through its Active Travel Strategy, recognising the important role walking plays in improving health, wellbeing and opportunities for people to be active outdoors.



[North Berwick Trust](#) which funds the cost of walk leaders for walks in and around the town of North Berwick, helping us deliver a varied and high-quality local programme.



[Prysmian](#), which has kindly provided sponsorship for vital publicity materials that make sure we can open up participation as widely as possible, such as flags, banners and vests worn by walk leaders.



[Scottish Forestry](#) which supports walks and events that encourage people to explore, enjoy and learn about East Lothian's woodlands.



The [Ramble Worldwide Outdoor Trust](#) is passionate about encouraging more people from all communities to be able to access and enjoy the outdoors safely. This year we are delighted that they have agreed to support our special 'Skills for the Hills' walk.



We sincerely thank all of our sponsors and supporters for helping make the East Lothian Walking Festival possible. Their investment enables hundreds of people each year to experience the physical, mental and social benefits of walking while discovering the beautiful landscapes, wildlife and heritage of East Lothian.

10. Financial report

	£	£
<i>Brought forward from Walkfest25</i>		2645.61
Income		
North Berwick Trust	360.00	
Scottish Forestry*	810.00	
Ramblers Worldwide Outdoor Trust	440.00	
CWP Energy	580.00	
East Lothian Council	500.00	
Prysmian	350.00	
Total Income		3040.00
Expenditure		
Walk leader costs	1910.00	
Minibus hire	381.66	
Minibus driver training**	180.00	
Website	1000.00	
Banners and Vests	419.00	
Mailerlite (newsletter)	127.11	
Total Expenditure		4017.77
<i>Surplus/deficit to be carried forward</i>		1667.84

Notes:

* Scottish Forestry grant has yet to be drawn down

** Driver training is not yet complete

11. recommendations for future Walkfest

Based on the evidence from WalkFest26, the Steering Group could consider the following priorities:

1. Review the booking and cancellation system, with particular attention to the ease of returning unwanted tickets.
2. Standardise walk descriptions, ensuring that distance, terrain, duration and level of difficulty are consistently provided.
3. Continue to offer a broad programme, retaining the balance between accessible, gentle and more challenging walks.
4. Develop more long-distance and multi-day opportunities, responding to participant demand.
5. Build on successful themed activities, particularly nature, wildlife, local history and geology.
6. Explore ways of attracting more younger participants, building on the success of the Youth Bat Detectors event.
7. Increase newsletter engagement, including encouraging participants to join the mailing list when booking.
8. Continue to provide free transport where it removes barriers to participation, while encouraging public and active travel wherever practical.
9. Maintain the Festival's free-to-participant model, recognising that external funding and sponsorship are essential to achieving its inclusion objectives.
10. Continue collecting participant data, while ensuring that the process is simple for walk leaders and that personal information is retained only for as long as necessary.

12. Conclusion

WalkFest26 has successfully completed its fifth year, further establishing the East Lothian Walking Festival as an important part of the county's community, health and wellbeing landscape.

The Festival provided opportunities for people to explore East Lothian, discover its history and natural environment, meet other people and develop their confidence as walkers.

The evidence from the participant survey is particularly encouraging. With an average walk rating of 4.9 out of 5, an average leader rating of 4.9, and a wellbeing and connection-to-nature rating of 4.4, participants clearly valued their Festival experience.

Perhaps most importantly, the Festival appears to be achieving an impact beyond the individual walks themselves. Participants reported feeling more confident, wanting to walk more often, exploring new places, joining new groups and taking on longer or more challenging walks.

The Festival also continues to attract new participants while retaining a strong returning audience.

There are, of course, areas to improve. The booking system remains frustrating for some participants, no-shows continue to affect the efficient use of places, and there is scope to broaden participation among younger people and men. However, these are opportunities to strengthen an already successful Festival rather than indications that its fundamental approach needs to change.

As one participant put it their experience left them:

“Falling in love with East Lothian all over again.”

That perhaps captures the essence of WalkFest26. The Festival has enabled people not only to walk, but to see East Lothian differently, meet new people, learn something new and discover what they themselves are capable of.

The Steering Group would like to thank all the walk leaders, volunteers, partner organisations, sponsors, funders and, most importantly, everyone who came along and took part in WalkFest26.