

Case study

Encouraging patients to fit 20 minutes of walking or cycling as part of a journey into their lives each day

Aim/context

The Mayor's Transport Strategy 2018 sets out the ambition that by 2041 all Londoners will be achieving 20 minutes of active travel per day, enabling them to get sufficient physical activity to maintain good health and wellbeing, in line with the Chief Medical Officers' recommendations. In the summer of 2019, Transport for London (TfL) commissioned research to explore how Londoners could integrate 20 minutes of active travel (walking or cycling as part of a journey) into their everyday lives.

Sarah* from Waltham Forest was one of the study participants. Sarah has a chronic illness that creates challenges for her daily



* participant's name has been changed

life. This meant she wasn't physically active prior to her involvement in the study. During investigations for an injury a year ago she was diagnosed with a new health problem related to inactivity and told that if she got more exercise things could get a lot better – and that without exercise the situation would get worse.

Because the advice was just given as 'get more exercise', Sarah asked her GP for more details about the kind of exercise that she could do given her situation.

"I couldn't go to the gym or do yoga or pilates because of the injury, so I said 'What kind of exercise can I do then?' and the GP just said 'Walking or swimming.'"

Sarah left the GP thinking about her options...

"Well I can't swim so that's out. I like walking but when I think of walking I think of 'going for a walk' as something you do on holiday, like 'a walk on the coast' – something you make time for. So that's what I set out to do – to try to fit in a recreational walk on most days."

Sarah was determined to find a way to 'get more exercise' and did a lot of research about how much and how briskly she'd need to walk to get exercise benefit. She managed a few months of recreational walking in local parks and natural areas,

but after a while she found it wasn't practical to fit extra walking into her daily life. And especially with the challenges of her underlying chronic condition it wasn't possible to keep up.

"I started with good intentions, but it was a real problem to find the time. And walking around the same places every day just to walk seemed pointless and quite boring. I was organising my life around 'The Walk' and it wasn't sustainable."



Sarah attends a multi-disciplinary service for her chronic condition, and regularly sees an occupational therapist.

"I talk to my occupational therapist about things I want to achieve and goals, so I tried to talk about my difficulties in getting this walking done, but they said they weren't allowed to talk about mobility, that had to be another part of the service. But I didn't need help actually walking, just advice about how to fit it in so that it was something I could achieve regularly."

Sarah also saw her GP several times during this period, but didn't feel like it was the right time to ask about her concerns

about managing to achieve exercise, as the consultations weren't about the same condition that she had been advised to exercise for. It was always a 'battle of time' for her and the doctor and she was never asked during these consultations about how she was getting on with her exercise goal.

"I assumed they thought that the matter of me needing to get more exercise was over and done with since I'd already had the advice to 'get more exercise' and so it didn't occur to them to add anything else or check-in with how I was getting on."

With all these challenges, Sarah found herself giving up on trying to get active.



Delivering the 20 minute challenge

TfL and the London Walking Forum partners wanted to understand how they could help inactive Londoners to get 20 minutes of active travel every day. The research company 2CV were commissioned to help explore this. One strand of the research was a 'behavioural challenge' in which research participants across three Outer London boroughs were challenged to try to fit 20 minutes of active travel into their day for two weeks. The challenge was designed to help understand real life experiences, motivations and barriers, and targeted people not currently achieving

the goal. Surveying people about attitudes and perceptions can be poor predictors of behaviour, whereas this immersive challenge gave researchers an in-depth understanding of what people actually do, rather than what they say they do (or will do).

Like other participants, when Sarah was recruited to the study she was asked if she was willing to try making a change to her daily behaviour. Sarah downloaded the participant app, and was asked to log her daily behaviour for a week as a baseline.

In the second week, study participants including Sarah were given a '20 minute activity challenge' that involved changing their activity and travel behaviour:

Your goal for the next two weeks is to get 20 minutes of walking and/or cycling as part of the journeys you make every day (including weekdays and weekends). The way that you make up these 20 minutes is completely up to you. You could complete all 20 minutes 'in one hit' OR split it out across the day but adding up to 20 minutes overall).

These journeys could include commuting to work, going to the shops, visiting the home of a friend/relative or meeting with friends.

Sarah was keen for the opportunity to do this, seeing it as a chance to try to get active again.

Impact

Sarah found the challenge to achieve exercise as part of a journey ‘a lightbulb moment’. She was excited to participate in the study because she wanted to get active.

“Why did it never occur to me that exercise could be walking as part of a journey?”

She found that exercise integrated into her journeys worked much better for her. She discovered ways to fit it in and take new routes or swap out her usual transport mode to do more walking. And all this without much disruption to her day-to-day life. She enjoyed it and found herself seeking new opportunities out rather than worrying about how she was going to ‘get more exercise’.



“Previously I would find myself in the situation of ‘oh I don’t have time for exercise because I have a journey to do’. This challenge solved nearly all the problems that I’ve been having about how to fit exercise into my life.”

Sarah got her active travel mostly by walking past the bus stops closest to her house to stops further away, and then picking the bus up to complete her journey. As her confidence increased she walked more ‘stops’, which she found encouraging and easy because it was ‘measurable and scalable’.

“I figured out how to walk parallel to the bus route so I could pick the bus up after walking on nicer and quieter routes away from the main road.”

The challenge created new habits for Sarah – a sustainable way of fitting in exercise whilst living her life. She has a regular activity which she now always walks to, building a 20-25 minute walk into her week. She enjoys walking in her area and seeing some of the natural environment and green space in the area and takes photographs to share on social media. She enjoys the fact that the walks have a ‘purpose’ and feels more satisfaction when she returns from a walk where she’s also run errands or achieved necessary journeys compared to a purely recreational walk.

Sarah feels that the challenge helped her get active first and foremost because of the revelation that exercise could come from active travel, making it so much easier and more enjoyable to integrate into her lifestyle. However she also thinks the challenge worked for her because of the specific and quantifiable nature of the goal, with 'guidelines' and a 'framework'. Having to check in with the researchers also helped her stay motivated as it gave her a sense of accountability and reminded her of the commitment she had set (to the project but also to herself). Little daily reminders to complete the challenge as well as tips and ideas for how she could fit more activity in as part of her daily journeys all helped.

One thing Sarah would have liked more support with, however, was finding 'nice routes' to walk in her neighbourhood. She could not find any maps to help her navigate an attractive walking route (as opposed to walking the bus route) and had to rely on her own local knowledge to find pleasant walking alternatives.

"If you search online for local walking routes you get nice long walks through parks and nature – which is lovely but we're back to the 'recreational walk', not something you do every day."

When she used journey mapper apps to find walking routes, she found that the ones recommended were simply driving

routes with extra time added and therefore were not very helpful.

The Future

In the future and over the coming months, Sarah would like to do more active travel for exercise, especially challenging herself to get outside even in poor weather. But she is also realistic about the challenges, including keeping motivated to maintain the good habits that taking part in the research project helped her establish.

Sarah's experience has made her reflect on what healthcare workers could do to help someone like her in future. She thinks that if a health care worker is going



to tell someone to get more active than they need to go further and give clear information and guidance about how to achieve it. Vague, well-meaning advice to 'get more exercise' risks simply serving as a reminder of what you are missing rather than an enabling and motivating message that encourages change. Sarah's "top tips" to health care professionals are:

- Tell people how much walking (or other exercise) 'counts' as active / what the guidelines are (for example walking or cycling for 20 minutes each day adds up to 140 minutes a week, which is very close to the Chief Medical Officers' recommendations for adults to get at least 150 minutes of exercise per week).
- Give suggestions for how to break down the weekly exercise goals into daily amounts (for example 20 minutes per day, or 2 x 10 minute or 4 x 5 minute trips).
- Tailor advice to show how exercise can be achieved in manageable and easy ways that suit the person's lifestyle (for example fitting it in rather than doing something extra)
- Remind them that they can get exercise as part of a journey – that "active travel" (walking or cycling as part of a journey) is an easy and achievable way to get active, and can be a good way to be time efficient
- Signpost people to wayfinding tools e.g. walking maps and apps
- Provide ways to check-in regularly

on progress – on or offline (like the motivating messages and daily reminders she received from 2CV during the study that helped her stay focused and "on-track")

"If I was getting a prescription I'd be told how many tablets to take per day, so if it's 'exercise on prescription' you need to be told how much and how often"

She suggests an information sheet with the basic facts, and some tailored local advice about places to walk, with the option of referral or self-referral to someone who can give advice and troubleshoot if you're still struggling after 5-6 weeks.

"I'd like some professional support to develop my own strategy, someone to check in with about how I can make this work, like I do with other aspects of managing my own conditions."

Sarah feels that the NHS could be much more holistic in approaches to long term conditions, and that any and every health professional that patients come into contact with - primary care staff; physiotherapists; occupational therapists; mental health teams; and others - should be able to give brief exercise advice about simple ways to get moving like walking for all or part of a journey.

(To read the full report of the '20 Minute Challenge' research, click [here](#))

Further case studies can be found here:

<https://tfl.gov.uk/corporate/about-tfl/corporate-and-social-responsibility/transport-and-health>