

## **Virtual walks: a design to support the social involvement of isolated individuals**

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**Problem:** A significant number of individuals are living in relative isolation. For instance, this is a common predicament for the elderly and for the disabled. Sometimes they will have concerned friends or relatives. But such contacts may not live nearby and, besides, being 'visited' is not the same as 'going out together'. Moreover, being able to 'go out' provides individuals and their companions with a richer basis for their joint conversation. Of course, going out is also the way in which individuals feel more part of their community. Can technology help give isolated individuals some greater sense of this 'getting out', a vehicle for richer conversation and greater social and cultural engagement?

**Proposed design:** It is common to see pedestrians talking into their mobile phones as they walk. They might be talking to a relative isolated at home, perhaps even sharing with them something of what they see from their walking. If the walker was wearing a miniature camera, it would be possible for the isolated relative to see the walk, as well as talk about it. Thus, the design proposed for this project involves configuring mobile phone and wearable cameras to support a 'virtual walking' conversation through IP telephony: a mobile walker linked to a screen-based partner. These walks might be orchestrated among friends and relatives, but a web-based scheduler is also sought whereby willing 'walkers' can identify their availability and isolated individuals can book a period of such shared contact.

**Clients' interest:** The Carers Federation is a national charity very interested in this scheme to improve the quality of life of people living alone. The University's LSRI is interested in the psychological impact of such links and the potential for supporting learning and interaction among housebound individuals.