

Feel Good in the Forest - Walkers: Chopwell Wood

As part of the Forestry Commission England and Sport England 'Active Forests' programme a focus group was undertaken in November 2021 at Chopwell Wood with participants involved in a weekly led walk as part of Feel Good in the Forest – Green Social Prescribing. Nine people participated in the focus group. Five men and four women ranging in age from 41-88. The weekly walk lasted for one hour.



Feel Good in the Forest – Green Social Prescribing

Feel Good in the Forest (FGITF) at Chopwell Wood is a Green Social Prescribing project and part of the wider Active Forests Programme. Green Social Prescribing links people to nature-based activities such as walking, community gardening and a range of other activities. GPs and other health and social care professionals can refer people to a link worker who helps them identify an activity that could benefit them. The aims of GSP are to improve mental health and reduce health inequalities. Participants in the focus group at Chopwell outlined that they had got involved due to a range of physical, social, and mental health problems including bereavement, Type II diabetes, anxiety, Parkinson's, and a stroke causing partial sight. Participants join a led one hour walk at Chopwell Wood which is run every Wednesday. Some participants knew about the site, while others were less familiar.

'I knew of it, but I hadn't realised how fantastic it was, you can just freely walk around. I thought you had to have permission' (Female)

Motivations to participate

A key motivation to join the walking group was to meet others and socially connect. This also led to people wanting and being motivated to continue to attend the walks. The group also sits down together after the hour's walk for a cup of tea and a chat, and this aids group cohesion.

'It's other people, as when Covid started I wasn't meeting people and that's why I wanted to come and start meeting people' (Female)

'Since my stroke it's about getting out and meeting people' (Male)

The Active Forest Coordinator and Lead Walker enthuse and encourage those in the group and notice when someone misses a session.

'I got a text from (the Active Forest Coordinator) one week when I didn't come along and that meant so much even though she might not have meant it. Just a text saying 'are you alright we've missed you', and I think that is important as well' (Female)

'If I had not come, I would have been just sitting in and watching the telly' (Male)

Benefits of Feel Good in the Forest

What was clear from the discussions was the importance of structure in people's lives if they are retired or not working. The routine of a weekly walk was seen as important as it helps to provide some of that structure.

'Getting out of the house and speaking to someone it's a routine' (Male)

'I think you need structure in your day particularly if you are on your own' (Female)

'Yes, and structure makes the time go quickly' (Female)

The mental health benefits were also raised as particularly important (see box for quotes). Wellbeing, relaxation, laughter, feeling fitter, safe activity, scenic attractiveness, and companionship were all identified as important benefits.

Benefits of Feel Good in the Forest

'For me initially it was about the people and I still enjoy the chat but now it's the walk so for an hour you don't think about anything else but your surroundings'

'This morning I had a bit of a bad morning but since I've been here everything's changed, because when I got on the bus it was pouring down and I thought oh no it's seen me coming. But once I got here and walked around I just forgot everything that went on this morning and think why did I have a bad morning, it clears your head.'

'At this time of year its autumn its absolutely lovely, I like the other seasons but especially autumn'

'It's a different atmosphere every week isn't it depending on the weather and the time of year'

The Green Social Prescribing weekly walk involves people facing a range of health-related problems during the Covid-19 pandemic which can add to people's anxiety levels. Joining a led walk with others provides companionship and is a motivation to participate on a regular basis. Many of the participants had been attending the walks for months. The friendly and sociable atmosphere motivated participants to continue and sustain their physical and social activity.

Funding: Sport England and Forestry Commission England

Website: <https://www.forestresearch.gov.uk/research/active-forest-programme-evaluation/>