

Feel Good in the Forest - Walkers: Thames Chase

As part of the Forestry Commission England and Sport England 'Active Forests' programme a focus group was undertaken in November 2021 at Thames Chase Forest with participants involved in a weekly led walk as part of the Feel Good in the Forest – Green Social Prescribing project. Five people participated in the focus group, 4 females and 1 male ranging in age from 55-77. The weekly walk lasted for one hour.



Feel Good in the Forest – Green Social Prescribing

Feel Good in the Forest (FGITF) at Thames Chase is a Green Social Prescribing project and part of the wider Active Forests Programme. Participants in the focus group at Thames Chase outlined that they had got involved in the walks for a number of reasons due to bereavement, caring responsibilities, epilepsy and with one person who volunteers at the site who was interested in supporting the walk and getting out with her dog. Most knew the site already, however one person talked about driving past it for work but never visiting. One person travels by bus for the weekly walks which involves a 15–20-minute walk from the bus stop to the site. The group stops for a drink and chat outside the café after the walk.

Motivations to participate

One person was caring for three people which gave her no time for herself, so she has made an effort to carve out some time for herself. Joining the weekly forest walk has led on to her joining a gym and losing weight. A couple of people had suffered bereavement, for one of these people a friend suggested she come along to the weekly walks. When discussing what attracted them to the activity one person stated that if it had been a focus on coffee and a chat it would not have been of interest. However, walking outside was what was appealing for her and doing things outside during the Covid pandemic has become increasingly important.

Benefits of Feel Good in the Forest

The benefits of the walks in the wood were various including the importance of social contact, of being outdoors in an attractive environment, seeing changes in

the seasons and the contribution to wellbeing both physical and mental (as outlined in the benefits box).

Benefits of Feel Good in the Forest at Thames Chase

'I always used to be very active and, as I say, for the last five years it's gone down to practically nothing, but then coming here has then led on to other things' (Female)

'Like I said, it's meeting different people, new faces, fresh because I was on a downer, a bad slope. I really needed a pick-up, because of the work business, I was in a dark place, but I'm starting to pick-up' (Male)

'As I said, you walk through the parks and the trees and it kind of gives you a sense of wellbeing. You can come here feeling really down sometimes but the moment you walk through that and you've spoken to people, you go home feeling completely different' (Female)

'Walking through the countryside it's lovely, the trees and also talking to people, I think it brings you out of yourself and I really feel I've benefited from it' (Female)

Supportive activity and an opportunity to learn

The walk leader and others who have led some of the walks were said to be very supportive and helpful. Some of the walks were led by people who talked about the trees or birds that the group were seeing, adding an extra dimension of interest. After one such walk one respondent stated:

'It's just really interesting, just learning. I was always outside when I was younger. I was always outside at the park, woods to a certain extent, although you couldn't go too far into the woods, because my mum told me not to. I think I've appreciated it more since lockdown, where we've just had to stop, but there are so many different birds, so many different types of trees and just having them pointed out' (Female)

'Every season has a different character, like you were saying, at this time the colours, and then the bulbs and flowers coming up and dying back. Every 12 months you've got all different characters and all different seasons, so you're learning' (Male)

The FGITF at Thames Chase plays an important role in participants weekly activities as they face a range of challenges. Having an outdoor activity is particularly important in the Covid pandemic and gets people out of the house and talking to others. A friendly, sociable, attractive, and supportive activity that is regular and lasts is especially important.

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