

'Real Spin' Focus Group: Bedgebury Forest

As part of the Forestry Commission England and Sport England 'Active Forest' programme a focus group was run with participants attending a 'Real Spin' (mountain bike) session at Bedgebury Forest. Nine women attended the class which was run and guided by a member of Quench Cycles. Four women were aged 35-44, four were 45-54 and one was 55-64. Most of the women were reasonably active but many needed to fit activity around everyday life of work and children, which was not always easy.



Motivations

Motivations to participate were to get out in the fresh air, the positive feeling participants got after a mountain bike ride, getting to know other people, catching up with friends and keeping healthy. Most of the women had been cycling at Bedgebury for between one to five years and tried to attend as often as they could. 'Real Spin' classes are available on Monday, Tuesday and Thursday and are run by Quench Cycles which provides bikes and helmets if required:

'I also love the fact that you can just come you don't have to worry about bringing your own bike'. 'That is a huge advantage because I used to bring my own bike but there is lifting it in and lifting it out of the car'.

Benefits

Gaining a sense of freedom was mentioned as important as well as acting as a role model for their children:

'My teenagers probably couldn't do some of the routes I do; for once they'll be like my goodness mum can you really do that?'

Benefits of Real Spin

'Yes definitely because it increases your ability to focus better as well. And it's good for dexterity as well as you having to navigate obstacles. Also the spatial awareness you get going through the trees'.

'There is also fresh air and getting out in the daylight because I suffer from Seasonal Affective Disorder in winter'.

Being a role model

'It's good for your children to see you going out and doing things, you get out of your comfort zone'

'My son started mountain biking at school 'cause he wanted to follow what I was doing'.

'I brought my daughter and she loved it'

Changes in behaviour and skills

'if you were to ask the guides [leading the rides] what they would say is not just seeing changes in fitness but proficiency and confidence and the speed and tackling obstacles they [the women] might have been nervous about doing at the beginning'

'Well when you feel fitter you can do more, you have more energy to do more, even paper work'

'It would be quite good to come with the family and now you know this run and that run; there are runs I can take the children down'

A key benefit identified was also stress relief with a session helping the women to leave behind worries, focus on their cycling and put things into perspective.

'If I get out, there is an immediate impact so it can help with day to day living and mental health.'

'I was recommended to do this by a physio as I have a really bad right knee and I was running but she said try cycling as it's low impact. I didn't imagine it was but it's been great.'

The social benefits of carrying out an activity together were part of the motivation to join 'Real Spin' as well as the support for improving technique, support in case of accidents, and identification of a variety of paths to ride along:

'Sometimes you lose confidence when you fall off. But you have to get back on and you might be a bit nervous for a bit'

Activity in the forest environment

The women talked about seeing deer, flowers and 'amazing birds' in the forest. Many had known Bedgebury for a number of years and viewed the changes made to the site in recent years positively, as the site had become more family friendly and has very good facilities:

'Yes definitely good changes because years ago it wasn't really for families it was just a big walk with lots of trees'

There was some concern expressed about the site sometimes becoming too busy in summer and the cost of car parking if someone was only visiting for a short period. The health benefits of cycling in the forest were considered important:

'They do say being in the forest environment that is better than any kind of cure you can get from the pharmacy'

The 'Real Spin' sessions were a social activity that provided interest and challenge to the participants and an activity they could enjoy for themselves, while fitting it into everyday work and family life.

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