

Pilates Focus Group: Delamere Forest

As part of the Forestry Commission England and Sport England 'Active Forest' programme a focus group was undertaken at Delamere Forest. Eight people participated in the focus group, 5 females and 3 males. Participants ranged in age from the 25-34 age category to the 75+. Five people were retired and the rest were working. All the participants had undertaken Pilates before joining the classes at Delamere. Some were regular participants; doing both classes run per week.



Pilates at Delamere Forest

Pilates classes are run at Delamere on a Tuesday and Friday from a small building in the forest. Twelve people participated in the Pilates session. When the weather is good the classes can be run outdoors. Mats, balls, stretch bands and blocks are used in the classes to enable participants to work on exercising different muscle groups and parts of the body. Most of the participants have been doing Pilates from 2-6 years, with one person being relatively new having started in the previous two months. A couple of people had been to other classes run by the instructor and were impressed by those, and decided to come to Delamere for Pilates.

Motivations

Motivations for getting involved included back problems: one person's was related to back trouble after pregnancy, with another person being recommended by their doctor to take up Pilates. One person took it up to mobilise their joints, and another because of the menopause. Another person came to stretch and develop core muscles to ride horses in competitions. There was general agreement of the need to keep sustaining their Pilates '*Oh yes you have to keep it up, we go twice a week*', with at least 3 people doing the classes twice a week.

Benefits of Pilates at Delamere

All of the participants had been to Delamere before. A woman horse rider came to the forest with her horse '*the roads are so dangerous to ride on*', others came to dog walk, mountain bike or run. One person came with grandchildren '*the forest is marvellous for entertaining children*'. Another person had got involved as a volunteer in the bog restoration project that took place at Delamere. The

benefits of the forest included the fresh air and peacefulness. Participants were enthused by seeing wildlife in the forest including snakes and birds such as woodpeckers. The group was social and chatted and joked easily with each other.

Benefits of Pilates at Delamere Forest

'I had a bad back... so it meant going to Pilates and it has helped with my back'

'It's particularly about strength, core strength and flexibility particularly for people with back problems'

'D and I are retired so it's nice to come out and meet other people even for just an hour or so. Even in the winter when you wouldn't really go out, it gets you out of the house'

'I think the fact that you do Pilates means you buy a Discovery Pass and you come up and use the café, without that I'm not sure we would necessarily come walking'

'It's lovely doing it (Pilates) outside in the fresh air'

'Person 1: 'You feel so much better afterwards'. Person 2: 'absolutely you do'

Sustaining activity and challenge

The instructor plays a key role in keeping the participants returning every week. An important part of this was that participants felt each class was different, as one of the long term participants outlined: *'six years is a long time not to get bored but it's different every week. You never find yourself looking at your watch and thinking - when's it end. I love it because it's different all the time'*.

Participants also talked about challenging themselves, with the instructor knowing their limits and abilities and helping them to push themselves. They also talked about seeing someone else trying to work on a Pilates position, which motivated them: *'you see the person next to you do it and think I'll have a go'*. The approach taken also means that younger and more flexible participants can be helped to improve as well as the older participants. The participants agreed that this was something they want to continue to do in the long term.

Learning

Learning about why particular moves and stretches can be useful for muscles and joints was something the participants generally agreed was important. *'Talking about the physiology and what it is that you are stretching and working, that is useful as in a lot of classes that does not happen'*. Another person joked: *'you can't do it but you can understand it'*. The instructor moved about the room so that all participants could see the moves they needed to do.

The Pilates classes at Delamere can cater for a wide range of ages and abilities. Having a knowledgeable instructor that can work on any issues or problems participants face and help them to overcome these was a motivation for continuing. Key benefits include a friendly and social atmosphere.

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Funding: Sport England and Forestry Commission England

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