

NHS Diabetes Prevention Group: Thames Chase Forest Centre

As part of the Forestry England and Sport England 'Active Forest' programme data was gathered at a Diabetes Prevention Programme run at Thames Chase Forest Centre. Participants were all aged over 50, with the majority being retired. Eleven people participated in a focus group, three women and eight men. All had been referred to the prevention programme by a General Practitioner or Nurse. Nine participants were white British and two were Asian.



Diabetes Prevention at Thames Chase Forest Centre

Thames Chase Forest Centre (TCFC) became an Active Forest site in April 2019. As one of the urban sites the Active Forest Coordinator focused on engaging with the health sector and identifying opportunities for those who were less active and in need of improving their health. TCFC was offered as a location for sessions of the NHS Diabetes Prevention Programme which provides personalised support for those who have been referred and are at risk of Type 2 diabetes. Participants attend seven sessions held weekly or fortnightly, they then move to 'Prevention Plus' which involves a session once a month for 3 months, before a final session a few months later. The whole programme takes place over 9 months. Blood sugar and weight are measured before and after the programme. The Diabetes Prevention Programme at TCFC takes place in the education centre which is a restored 17th century Essex Barn. In general, these courses are often run in medical centres, community hospitals, libraries, churches and community halls.

What the sessions involve

Each session is run by a trained person, about 20-25 attend the sessions at TCFC. Participants learn about Type 2 diabetes, managing weight, types of food to eat and avoid, portion control, how to assess food labelling and the types of physical exercise they should be doing. The session, after which the focus group was organised, involved participants weighing themselves, reflecting in small groups on what they had learnt over the previous five sessions, completing a short satisfaction survey and undertaking physical activity that involved using resistance bands to work on various muscles in the arms, legs and back. They did these exercises indoors. All of the participants expressed surprise that they had

been referred to the Diabetes Prevention Programme, they had not expected it and were finding it a challenge to change food eating and buying habits.

Getting to Thames Chase Forest Centre

Two people were able to walk to the site, one person lived about a mile away and the other person walked two miles over fields to the site; the rest drove. The group highlighted that getting to the site by public transport was difficult with a bus running, only, every 2 hours. There was some discussion about parking, one woman noted that on busy days the car park could be full which was 'frustrating', another woman questioned the cost of parking not for herself, but for others who may struggle to meet the cost if they visited regularly.

Using and enjoying woodlands and greenspace

Ten out of the eleven focus group participants had visited the TCFC before to walk, walk their dog, cycle, or bring grandchildren to play, or use a trail aimed at children such as the Zog trail. Another person comes to the site for University of the Third Age sessions. Other Thames Chase sites mentioned that people used were Belhus, Ingrebourne and Stubbers. One woman who grew up in Mumbai with no greenspace to access found it took time on moving to England to get used to being away from buildings. She now loves going for walks in greenspaces rather than on roads. Retired participants talked about the importance of socialising and how this often involved meeting friends to walk, sometimes in nature, and eat and drink; making it a challenge to maintain good eating habits.

Open to new social and physical activities

There was quite a bit of interest in any new physical activities that might be organised at TCFC such as Nordic Walking or working with the resistance bands. The group were keen on the social element as a motivation to get active.

Enjoying Thames Chase Community Forest

A couple of people remembered the site as farmland before the TCFC was created.

Interviewer: 'Does the site [TCFC] now feel like a woodland?'

Male 1: 'It's getting there'

Male 2: 'It's nice to have the facility and to be able to get out and walk'

Male 3: 'I think we are very fortunate in this area, there are some lovely places we are able to get to. In the city you don't get the choice we have. It's a shame if you can't enjoy these facilities'.

Participants were shocked when they found they had been referred to a diabetes prevention programme. However, they felt that they had learnt a lot on the course and were working to change their diet and physical activity habits. They felt very fortunate to live in an area with such a variety of woodland and greenspaces to access in the Thames Chase Community Forest.

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Funding: Sport England and Forestry England

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