

Nordic Fitness Walking Focus Group: Haldon Forest

As part of the Forestry Commission England and Sport England 'Active Forest' programme a focus group was undertaken at Haldon Forest. Eleven people participated in the focus group, 10 females and one male. Six people were aged 45-64 and five were 65+. Seven participants' health was 'limited a little'. The majority of participants were retired. Many participated in the Nordic Fitness Walking to improve their health and fitness due to a number of health related problems.



Nordic Fitness Walking at Haldon

Nordic Fitness walking at Haldon has been running since September 2017. Participants sign up for a term of 5-6 weeks, with the sessions lasting for one hour, and the distance walked is 3-5K. All of the participants are trained and guided by a qualified instructor on how to Nordic Walk and use the poles to ensure that they engage their upper body as well as their legs during the walk. The instructor encourages participants to monitor their speed, heartrate and set their own fitness goals. Four of the participants had not been to Haldon Forest before, and seven people had not undertaken Nordic Walking previously.

Motivations

Motivations for getting involved included health reasons, recovering and increasing fitness, muscle tone and flexibility after surgery, or heart problems. The social aspect of the walk with friendly people was a motivator for a few participants, while for another person it was a local activity near to where she lived. One participant also stated '*I was looking for something to come out and do, that I could do on my own as well*'. Another participant used the forest regularly with her family, most often for cycling. Joining an organised and supported session, with an experienced instructor was particularly important for one participant who felt she would not easily have the motivation to walk herself and needed support after surgery.

Benefits of Nordic Fitness Walking

The group was mixed in terms of meeting the recommended amount of 2.5 hours of physical activity per week. A few met the recommendation, while others did not. One participant aimed to meet it in the future. Her friend persuaded her to

join the walks (*'it's taken me two years to persuade her actually'*) and she enjoyed the activity much more than she anticipated. The benefits of getting involved included the social interaction, being out in the fresh air, away from cars and pollution, and the beauty of the forest. Spotting flora and fauna (flowers and butterflies) was also mentioned, as well as mental wellbeing with the site being described as *'quiet and peaceful'*.

Benefits of Nordic Fitness Walking at Haldon Forest

'You see I'm not tempted to go to the gym, I have tried but I just don't like it. I find it very intimidating. I have only done this for the second time today but I really feel the benefit. I feel as if I'm using my arms, legs, core. It's nice being outside in the fresh air'

'You notice these little flowers as you walk round, it's uplifting'

'If you go for a walk you want to be breathing in fresh air, away from the traffic and diesel fumes'

'The forest is very varied, so you always have an interesting view and on a hot day you have the dappled shade as well, which is lovely'

Progression and skills development

Many of the participants were also undertaking other activities including Yoga, Pilates, Canoeing, and Aerobic classes. Most of this is undertaken indoors, a few however, preferred to do their activity outdoors. Participants tended to agree that they competed not against each other but against their own objectives. One participant talked about having to learn a new skill, because with Nordic walking there is a need to engage the brain as well as the body: *'I think I've improved because last week I could get my left hand working but not the right, so it was a lift, drag etc. This week I am lifting without dragging – an improvement'*. Nearly half of the participants have developed fitness goals they want to achieve through the sessions, with one person stating *'I want to use it as a fitness tool'*. While another participant stated: *'if you want to increase your health you need to do something like this'*.

Other ideas for activity

Participants had a variety of ideas that might encourage people in their demographic to become active. These included walking: Frisbee, Football, Netball. The use of E-bikes (electronic) was mentioned *'supporting bodies that are less able'*. Foraging walks, linking the activity of gathering with nutritional education, development of outdoor gym equipment made from natural materials.

Nordic Fitness Walking provides opportunities for a somewhat older demographic to sustain, and gain fitness – sometimes after health and mobility related issues. Having an organised activity where people are cared for and supported by an enthusiastic instructor was seen as an important motivator and benefit.

For further information contact: liz.obrien@forestry.gsi.gov.uk

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