

## Active England evaluation

The link between various forms of ill-health and sedentary lifestyles is widely recognised. It is also now widely acknowledged that opportunities for healthy exercise and recreation are not equally distributed across society. Increasingly, there is a move within the UK forestry sector both to facilitate the use of forests and woodlands for health-related physical activity, and to encourage use amongst people from a wide range of social, cultural and economic backgrounds. This research assessed five forest-based Active England projects to monitor levels of participation among under-represented groups and to evaluate a number of targeted interventions. The research showed varied results across sites and target groups and highlighted both the significant benefits gained by some participants as well as the persistent nature of some forms of under-representation. The research illustrated the positive impact of organised, group activities and the need for targeted outreach work to overcome barriers to participation.



*“You don’t notice you’re pedalling away if you’re chatting to someone ... and last week I felt really good cycling up the hills and that was because I had someone next to me ... cos when I walk I’m on my own so perhaps coming and doing a group activity is very nice ... I really enjoy it”*

Over 50s cyclist, Rosliston Forestry Centre

## Background

In response to a new policy drive, particularly by the Department of Health, to encourage healthy, active lifestyles and to address the health inequalities associated with low participation among certain groups, Sport England launched the Active England programme in 2003 with Big Lottery funding. Five woodland sites across England successfully bid for Active England funding. These included Great Western Community Forest in Wiltshire, Greenwood Community Forest in Nottinghamshire, Rosliston Forestry Centre in Derbyshire, Bedgebury Forest in Kent and Haldon Forest Park in Devon. In 2005 the Social and Economic Research Group at Forest Research initiated a programme of research to monitor and evaluate these five projects.

## Objectives

This research aimed to:

- monitor changes in visitor and visit profiles across the five projects
- evaluate each project’s ability to increase participation amongst target groups and to explore the barriers to using forests and woodlands for physical activity
- offer recommendations for future programme and project delivery

## Methods

- On-site surveying over two years for the dynamic analysis of visitors and visits.
- Spatial, demographic profiling of the catchment of each site to reveal the extent of target group (under-) representation.
- Shared activities and focus groups of both ‘users’ and ‘non-users’ to examine attitudes to health, physical activity, forests and woodlands and the barriers to increased use.
- Semi-structured interviews with site representatives to explore their experiences of project delivery and lessons learnt.

## Findings

The on-site surveying recorded significant increases in representation of some target groups:

- 16–44 age group at Bedgebury, Rosliston and Haldon – primarily attributable to the new cycle, walking and play trails, and the new equipment and infrastructure provided
- family visits to all the sites
- black and minority ethnic groups at all the sites, with significant increases at Bedgebury, Rosliston and Haldon

The focus groups of either ‘users’ or ‘non-users’ and interviews with project staff produced the following key research findings:

- Users identified two primary motivations to get involved: (1) socialising and meeting new people; and (2) the chance to become more active to improve health.

- Users identified the following key benefits of getting involved in regular, organised activities:
  - socialising
  - contact with nature
  - mental and physical health improvements
  - a sense of achievement and self-improvement
  - enjoyment
  - positive influence on other areas of life.
- Evidence from users suggests that involvement in the project activities often led to more active lifestyles.
- Volunteers made crucial contributions to the delivery of the projects providing, in many cases, a vital human resource to lead activities such as health walks. The volunteers themselves also benefited from involvement by developing their own abilities and improving self-esteem.
- Those who used woodlands and green spaces more frequently expressed stronger views and identified a wider range of benefits from the sites than non-users.

## Recommendations

The following recommendations are based on the results of the research.

- There should be adequate staff allocation, training and support for targeted outreach and community engagement. Outreach work must be adequately funded and the time required to engage with hard-to-reach groups should be realistically factored into project delivery.
- Staff need support and adequate time allocation for long-term strategic and business planning.
- Monitoring and evaluation should be carefully designed and planned so that data can inform decisions about on-going project and wider service delivery.
- Targeted project publicity and ‘facilitated access’ for under-represented groups should be focused at the local level, using existing community structures. Word of mouth and communication through local social networks are critical to successful engagement.
- Led activities and ‘facilitated access’ for targeted groups should be supported as they provide an invaluable form of support and encouragement to get involved.
- Organised activities run on a regular basis are more likely to bring about sustained changes in behaviour than one-off events that attract large audiences.

### Partners

Forestry Commission England, Forest Research, Sport England, Rosliston Forestry Centre, Greenwood Community Forest, Great Western Community Forest, Bedgebury Pinetum, Haldon Forest Park.

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### Reports and publications

The following reports can be downloaded from [www.forestresearch.gov.uk/activeengland](http://www.forestresearch.gov.uk/activeengland)

Morris, J. and O'Brien, L. (2009a). *Active England: 'Get Active in the Forest' – Rosliston Forestry Centre*. Report to the Forestry Commission.

Morris, J. and O'Brien, L. (2009b). *Active England: 'Park Life' – Greenwood Community Forest*. Report to the Forestry Commission.

O'Brien, L. and Morris, J. (2009a). *Active England: The Woodland Project*. Comparative Report. Report to the Forestry Commission.

O'Brien, L. and Morris, J. (2009b). *Active England: Haldon Forest Park*. Report to the Forestry Commission.

O'Brien, L. and Morris, J. (2009c). *Active England: Great Western Community Forest*. Report to the Forestry Commission.

O'Brien, L. and Morris, J. (2009d). *Active England: Bedgebury National Pinetum and Forest*. Report to the Forestry Commission.