

## The Chopwell Wood Health Project

In 2005, the Department of Health published *Choosing activity: a physical activity action plan*, which recommends that people undertake at least thirty minutes of moderate intensity exercise on at least five days per week to benefit their health. For children this should be at least one hour of moderate intensity exercise every day. Research has shown that physical activity can help to reduce heart disease, stroke, diabetes, certain types of cancer and obesity. This work focused on an evaluation of the Chopwell Wood Health Project in northeast England and highlights ways in which the Forestry Commission can work with health promoters to encourage people to become more physically active. The evaluation was undertaken by the Primary Care Development Centre at Northumbria University.



### Background

The Chopwell Wood Health Project was developed by a partnership consisting of the Forestry Commission, Gateshead Primary Care Trust, Derwentside Primary Care Trust and the Friends of Chopwell Wood. It ran for 15 months from May 2004 and employed a project leader. Two key elements were developed:

- 1) General Practitioner referrals were linked to the Gateshead Opportunities for Active Lifestyles Scheme. Patients could be referred by their doctor to Chopwell Wood to walk, cycle, and participate in tai chi or conservation work. All of the activities were led by trained leaders.
- 2) A series of school visits took place in support of the Derwentside Healthy Schools programme. Four local schools made four visits each to the wood to undertake physical activity, learn about nutrition, healthy eating and stress reduction.

### Objectives

This research aimed to:

- raise awareness of woodlands as a resource for improving the health and well-being of people in surrounding communities
- develop and evaluate practices for improving health that have the potential to be extended beyond the project
- establish a partnership between the Forestry Commission, the local community and the health sector

*“It was fun exploring the wood [Chopwell] and getting lost and trying to find our way back, it was really challenging”*

Pupil at a school near to Chopwell Wood

### Methods

- Questionnaires were completed by the pupils and staff of the four schools before and after their four visits to Chopwell Wood.
- Parents of the children who participated also completed questionnaires.
- Focus groups were held with members of staff from the schools involved and with those patients referred by their doctors who chose to undertake their physical activities at Chopwell.
- An on-site visitor survey was undertaken by the Friends of Chopwell Wood.

## Findings

Two hundred and twenty-nine young people from four local primary schools participated in the project and had four site visits each. After the project there was a significant increase in the percentage of pupils regarding Chopwell Wood as a healthy place, from 74% pre-visit to 87% post-visit. Following the project there was increased usage of Chopwell amongst families; often because the children asked their parents to take them to the woodland so they could show them what they had been doing. Parents and staff felt strongly that the project had increased awareness of healthy lifestyles and an appreciation of nature in the young people.

Twenty-one people were referred from five GP practices local to Chopwell Wood; thirteen of those referred chose to participate in activities at Chopwell. A further twenty people from practices not local to Chopwell chose to come to the woodland. The patients had to undertake a thirteen week programme of physical activities. The main reasons for people's referrals were coronary heart disease, weight, depression, blood pressure and back pain. Thirty of the thirty-three people referred to Chopwell completed the full thirteen weeks of activities. A further one hundred and twenty-eight people referred themselves and participated in walking, cycling and tai chi activities, after seeing publicity about the project.

## Recommendations

The evaluation provides evidence of how the project benefited different age groups. The short-term benefits included greater awareness of health issues and enjoyment of physical activity. However, evaluation of the project did not carry on after the project activities had been completed, making it difficult to state any long-term well-being benefits.

GP referrals and the Healthy School Standard are nationwide initiatives and therefore the approach taken at Chopwell Wood could work in other areas if effective partnerships can be developed.

For future projects and interventions we suggest:

- ensuring that monitoring and evaluation is embedded into projects and interventions from the beginning. Longitudinal evaluation beyond the life of the project is crucial for understanding whether increases in physical activity or changes in perceptions are sustained.
- bringing together partners at an early stage to develop projects that can meet the objectives of each organisation.
- recognising that project leaders can play a pivotal role both operationally with project users and strategically with stakeholders in publicising and running the work.

### Partners

Forestry Commission, Forest Research, Derwentside Primary Care Trust, Gateshead Primary Care Trust, Friends of Chopwell Wood, Northumbria University.  
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### Reports and publications

O'Brien, E and Snowdon, H. (2007). Health and well-being in woodlands: a case study of the Chopwell Wood Health Project. *Arboricultural Journal* 30, 45-60.

O'Brien, E. (2005). *Trees and woodlands: nature's health service*. 50 pp. Forest Research, Farnham. Downloadable from <http://www.forestresearch.gov.uk/fr/INFD-5ZBBG5>

Snowdon, H. (2005). *Evaluation of the Chopwell Wood Health Project*. 77 pp. Northumbria University, Report for Forestry Commission England.  
<http://www.forestresearch.gov.uk/chopwellhealth>