

## Crisis Focus Group: Chopwell Wood

As part of the 'Feel Good in the Forest' (FGITF) social prescribing element of the Forestry England and Sport England 'Active Forests' Programme, a focus group was run with a Crisis group during the lunch break on their activity day at Chopwell Wood. Eight men and one woman took part in the activities; the group were joined by their leaders (one male, one female) for the focus group in the forest classroom.



### Crisis Group at Chopwell Wood

The local Crisis group, a charity for people experiencing homelessness, have been visiting Chopwell Wood once a month for organised activities since April 2021. Some participants had joined the monthly activities several times, others were joining for the first time. Because of limited income most were unable to visit the forest outside the monthly organised session when the charity provides minibus transport. However, some participants have started volunteering at the woods since joining the FGITF programme. Many of the group had been homeless for several months and often experience social isolation while living alone or in supported accommodation, with some also recovering from drug or alcohol addiction.

### Physical activities

The group split into two for separate morning and afternoon activities. The morning bike ride was led by two male 'Bike for Health' activity leaders (ALs), with four male participants: two aged around 40/50 and two aged around 30. Bike for Health provided the mountain bikes and led participants on a planned route through the woods. While the two younger men cycled regularly, one of the older participants had not cycled recently and noticed himself getting fitter and stronger each time he joins the rides; the Active Forests Coordinator helped him recognise his own progress. In the afternoon the same group took part in catapulting, firing at three targets tied between trees. After practicing individually, the group split into two teams, each competing to reach the highest score; participants took the competition seriously but were supportive of each other. For most this was a new experience, but one asylum-seeking participant had previous experience and spoke of the cultural importance of catapult skills in his home country. Afterwards both groups came together for an archery session, with all participants and staff joining in.

## Benefits

Participating in outdoor activities was seen as improving both physical and mental health, and participants enjoyed the relaxed atmosphere. Activities sometimes had to pause to allow for walkers and dogs to pass, but group leaders highlighted how the opportunity to mix with people from different backgrounds (e.g. the public, instructors and their children) helped participants develop self-confidence.

### Health Benefits

*Male participant 1 : 'From my point of view, it's got me back into the outdoors.... From quite a bad place I was in. Self-confidence, self-esteem, just doing something worthwhile a bit of fresh air, it's all good.'*

*Male participant 2: 'I was homeless and then I got referred to Crisis, I've been coming here 4 or 5 times now and it helps me sleep. Every time I come here I tend to get a good night's sleep.'*

### Social Connection

*Group Leader: 'Just seeing people from different backgrounds as well, brings about a lot of confidence in people, it brings out the best in people, it really does. The same with this environment, as I say it really, really does make the best out of all our members.'*

*Male participant: 'Mental health, everything you know. Just gets you back involved with people, socialising with people.'*

## Benefits of doing physical activity in the forest

The forest was seen as a break from the stresses of everyday life and a safe environment away from distractions, compared with an urban or indoor space. The forest engaged the senses and provided something to focus on; one participant interacted with the forest environment by leaving the path to look at fallen trees, tasting pine sap and discussing its medicinal properties.

### Benefits of doing physical activity in the forest

*Group leader: 'It's a very mindful place in that like all your senses are stimulated, it's the smells, it's the sounds, it's the sights, it's the wildlife.'*

*Male participant: 'You're a happier person when you go from the place...clears the cobwebs.'*

*Group Leader: 'Bringing people together who have got something in common, in a nice, positive, fresh, clean environment that's away from the city centre. I just think, it's often see it as an instant release like people get off the bus and just going oh and it's just like an instant relief from a lot of their day-to-day pressures and stresses and worrying about appointments and meetings and stuff like that, it's just a nice little break.'*

**Funding:** Sport England and Forestry England

**Website:** <https://www.forestresearch.gov.uk/research/active-forests-programme-evaluation-pilot-phase/active-forests-programme-reports-and-publications/>