

Referral Agent Focus Group: Chopwell Wood

As part of the 'Feel Good in the Forest' (FGITF) social prescribing element of the Forestry England (FE) and Sport England 'Active Forests' Programme, a focus group was run with referral agents at Chopwell Wood. Five women (one under 30, one aged 30-50, three 50+) and one man (aged 30-50) took part alongside the Active Forests Coordinator (AFC).



Referral agent meeting at Chopwell Wood

Referral agents from organisations including the local council, NHS, and addiction recovery charities attend quarterly meetings with the AFC on site to enable them to see and experience the woods and activities before signposting potential participants to the FGITF programme. One was visiting for the first time, while others had been before and knew each other. The AFC took the group on a walk around the woods, before sitting on the benches outside the forest classroom for a discussion.

Referral process and motivations for referral

Referral agents signpost potential participants to FGITF by giving them a leaflet containing the AFC's contact details so they can contact the AFC directly. They reassure the participant if necessary (e.g. about facilities available on site), as well as letting the AFC know to expect a new participant. Referrals are made for a range of issues including weight loss and 'non-clinical issues' such as loneliness. Referral agents choose to refer people to FGITF because it is free and offers a variety of activities in one place. It is seen as less intimidating than a gym or conventional exercise class, while Forestry England is perceived as a 'reputable organisation'. Those working in addiction recovery also highlighted the relative 'safety' of Chopwell's quiet forest environment for people recovering from addiction, and pointed out that a potential rollout of FGITF to busier 'destination' sites may be off-putting for some participants:

'It is massive for the people that we support because other trips there will be pubs there and we're passing various different places...When you come to a place like this, you know there are no triggers there and you know they're completely safe.'

Participant Behaviours

Referral agents follow up with participants after they join an activity, sometimes conducting ongoing progress reviews, to identify positive changes in behaviour. These included trying new activities within the FGITF programme on their own initiative and bringing friends or family to visit Chopwell Wood outside the programme. Participants also demonstrated increased confidence, in both recognising their own skills and building social connections:

'We had a lot of people recognising what different skills they had. Every time we've had a trip they've got back and they were saying, actually, I was really good at this. Whether it was the archery or doing the fires...

We do have people then really noticing that they've got skills in different places and talking about it and feeling proud of themselves that they've achieved different things.'

'I think one of the things that we look out for is them developing friendships so they're not feeling as isolated or as lonely. I've had a few patients where they've been recently bereaved and they feel very lost. Whereas coming to something like this they can meet new people.'

Barriers to participation

When a participant suffers from anxiety or lacks self-confidence referral agents may contact the AFC on their behalf and provide someone to accompany them. Transport was seen as the biggest barrier to participation, although free activities helped offset the cost of funding transport.

Referral agents across a variety of organisations in the third and public sectors referred clients to FGITF for physical and mental health issues, as well as social isolation. Visiting the woods and trying the activities on offer helped referral agents promote the programme to potential participants, as well as providing an opportunity to network. Referral agents monitor participants for changes in their wellbeing and behaviour after they join the programme, and noticed participants they had referred developing in self-confidence and building social connections.

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/>