

## Gentle Seated Exercise Focus Group: Chopwell Wood

As part of the 'Feel Good in the Forest' social prescribing element of the Forestry England and Sport England 'Active Forests' Programme, a focus group with seated exercise participants (five women and one man, all aged 50+) was run at Chopwell Wood. Group members all experienced mild to moderate health conditions and/or social isolation, and had been coming to the sessions for between 1 week and 1 year.



### Gentle Seated Exercise at Chopwell Wood

The weekly session normally involves a seated fitness class of gentle exercises outdoors or in the forest classroom but was cancelled because the Activity Leader (AL) was away that week. However, participants came in voluntarily to speak about their experiences and to maintain the social element of the class. Most had visited Chopwell Wood before they joined. For some it was a new activity, while others had already been doing similar aerobics classes in a conventional setting or using their own exercise equipment at home. Some drove to the class or caught the bus to the woods, while others were able to walk from nearby villages.

### Motivations and behaviours

Key 'life events,' such as retirement, diagnosis of health conditions (eg. diabetes) or life-changing illnesses (eg. stroke), acted as triggers for many of the participants to start exercising regularly, while others were experiencing long-term social isolation exacerbated by the covid-19 pandemic, and joined the class to make friends. However, none of the group were referred to the class by health workers; most were recommended by friends already in the group or had seen it advertised on lists of classes for older people, and the social aspect has encouraged participants to continue attending. The group discussed previous attendees they believed were referred to the programme and who had not continued with the class; they felt this was because they had been '*forced*' to join rather than being self-motivated. Since joining, some participants felt motivated to do more light exercise (eg. walking, gardening) or to try new activities (eg. other FGITF groups, home exercise equipment). Two participants also mentioned how being in the forest environment had inspired them to reconnect with nature through events or educational apps.

## Benefits of Seated Exercise at Chopwell Wood

While the class enables participants to keep fit, they enjoyed the relaxed nature of the teaching, as the AL allows them to follow the exercises at their own pace without pushing them. However, social connection and mental wellbeing were seen as the main benefits, with physical health benefits seen as a bonus:

*'I think it's been more beneficially, mentally, to me, than physically...because I'm on my own, I come here and I meet people and it, the bonus is, I'm doing exercise.'*

Participants enjoyed the social cohesion and friendly, non-judgemental atmosphere of the group, often meeting for a coffee after the class. Although group members already visited the woods they liked the social aspect of the organised class, which facilitates the physical health aspect by *'making the exercise less daunting'*.

Participants highlighted the importance of an AL who understands the needs of the group; because the current AL involves them in meaningful conversations rather than focusing only on the physical fitness element, the class *'doesn't feel like exercise'* and is instead something participants look forward to each week.

## Benefits of doing physical activity in the forest

Participants enjoyed the calming effect of the forest environment: the quietness, the greenness and the wildlife: participants had seen red kites, squirrels and deer. Some noticed different sounds and smells depending on the weather or season, as well as starting to take more notice of tree species outside of the weekly class.

*'It's like if I go to the seaside, I can stare at the sea because that's calming... because it's nature... and nobody's got any control over it and you're in here, and you're just, even when it's windy, there's different sounds... and if it's raining, you hear different birds'*

One participant also highlighted the spiritual benefits of feeling part of nature:

*'It just reminds you that you're part of the whole system and, you know, this idea that, sometimes I get quite emotional, you know, in here, just because it's something bigger than me and ...it's just, you know, feel that we can, we might be part of it.'*

Participants preferred exercising outdoors than in a gym, because of the fresh air and because nobody was watching them exercise; hay fever and having to cancel because of stormy weather were seen as the only downsides.

Social connection was a key motivation and benefit for seated exercise participants. They also appreciated the calming effect of being surrounded by nature.

**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/>