

## Volunteer Focus Group: Chopwell Wood

As part of the Forestry England and Sport England 'Active Forests' Programme, a focus group was run with the volunteer group at Chopwell Wood. Seven volunteers participated in the focus group before they started their volunteering tasks for the day: 2 men and 3 women aged 50+, one man aged between 25-35, and one teenage girl volunteering with her grandfather during the school holidays, joined by the Active Forests Coordinator (AFC).



### Motivations for volunteering at Chopwell Wood

Volunteer days happen every Wednesday at Chopwell Wood, starting with a chat over tea or coffee before tasks are allocated. Many of the volunteers live locally and wanted to 'give something back' to a place they visit regularly for walks. Others were looking for volunteering opportunities after retirement, while some had joined Feel Good in the Forest (FGITF) activities and wanted to get more actively involved. Participants liked the informal nature of the group, as it does not have a strict time requirement, so suits different people's schedules. A sense of friendly competition motivated volunteers to continue taking part and pushing themselves:

*Female volunteer: 'We all have a great bit of banter and there's a bit of competition going on and there's also, they haven't mentioned it yet but they feel very proud of what they've achieved.'*

### Changes since Active Forests programme launch

Since the launch of the Active Forests programme at Chopwell Wood, volunteer tasks have shifted away from 'pure' woodland management (eg. litter-picking, clearing branches), becoming more varied and 'people-focused'; volunteers recently built a bug hotel and a walking football pitch for the FGITF programme. Three volunteers have also completed training to lead walks. Volunteers liked seeing the FGITF programme develop and change over time, rather than remaining static. Because of their long-term attendance on site, volunteers were able to notice FGITF participants 'bloom and grow' over time as they build self-confidence, as well as some participants going on to join volunteering sessions. They noticed the woods being busier in general since the launch of FGITF, which they saw as positive. Volunteers felt people were more likely to join organised group activities as it

meant they did not have to plan a route through the woods themselves, and they emphasised the therapeutic effects of exercise in the forest environment:

*Female volunteer: 'Half an hour walking through the wood is worth an hour on a psychiatrist's bench.'*

## Benefits for volunteers

Volunteers enjoyed the freedom of being outdoors, especially after lockdown. For some, the volunteering session was a reason to go out and a highlight of the week. Volunteers enjoyed feeling connected to nature, for example observing seasonal changes and seeing wildlife, and the forest was a calming environment for those suffering from anxiety. Having something to do was also felt to be important for mental wellbeing. However, the social aspect was more important than the specific tasks on offer each week. Volunteers enjoyed the 'non-judgemental' camaraderie of the group, with volunteers helping and learning from each other.

*Female volunteer: 'It's good to be outdoors anyway, but I think particularly after being confined to home, in your garden for a couple of years, it is a bit of that extra freedom.'*

## Feeling like part of a team

Volunteers are now managed by the Active Forests Coordinator (AFC), having previously been ranger-led. While the AFC has only been in post since 2019, some of the volunteers have gained significant experience of the site and its management while volunteering at Chopwell for over 20 years. This has led to occasional disagreement over how the site should be managed. However, the relationship between volunteers and AFC is good-humoured and full of 'banter', and volunteers liked the way the current non-hierarchical management structure made them feel part of the team, rather than the AFC being 'the boss'. They got on well with the wider site maintenance team and highlighted how their 'green uniform' made them feel valued and included. Volunteers also praised the AFC's creativity in offering a range of tasks suited to different levels of ability:

*Female volunteer: 'It's also a really good because it's really inclusive, so you've got the likes of me and [male volunteer] who aren't very good at walking anymore but there's always jobs for us do you know what I mean, that suits us and we feel well included don't we?'*

The volunteers were able to observe how participants benefitted from the FGITF programme, as well as themselves experiencing the benefits of being outdoors and connected to both nature and each other. They enjoyed seeing the programme change and develop, and liked feeling part of the team.

**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/>