

Staff: 'Forestry 100 Challenge Team'

As part of the Forestry England and Sport England 'Active Forest' programme the Forestry 100 running series was developed in 2019. Eight staff signed up to do ten 10K runs to celebrate the centenary year of the Forestry Commission. Staff are from different parts of the Forestry Commission family. Five women and three men undertook the runs as a challenge to themselves, and with the aim of motivating other staff to get involved. Interviews and focus groups were undertaken at two points in time: spring and autumn.



Forestry 100 sites

Sixteen forest sites hosted the Forestry 100 running series with the first run in March and the last in December 2019. Staff could choose their ten runs from these sixteen sites to fit in with their own availability, and how they wanted to organise their travel to the sites. Three participants did more than ten runs in total as they were able to fit these into their schedule. A couple of participants have also run other 10Ks outside of the Forestry 100 series. This highlights that all participants made a big commitment to challenge themselves.

Initial motivations to start running

One participant started running only in the past few years and had done some 5K runs with his daughter.

'This is the first year I have ever done a 10K, previously I have just done three 5Ks one in each of the previous three years' (Male)

Another participant only started running a few years ago after a bereavement as a 'stress reliver', he then ended up doing some very long distant runs of 100K as: 'a release from my emotions, it's quite meditative when you are doing that long running as it's quite a challenge'. He also felt that running was a way to maintain a steady weight. One female staff member stated, 'I always felt I had a good level of fitness but never thought I would be a runner', she got the opportunity of a free staff place at a Kielder Forest 10K in 2018, and this spurred her on to take up the Forestry 100 challenge. While another staff member got involved in running in a previous job when a colleague organised a couch to 5K group which graduated into her taking part in parkrun, she also outlined she had never run a competitive race before the Forestry 100 series. Another participant carried out runs with friends in 2018 and then ran every day for Red January (mental health) and collected money for this.



Therefore, there was a mix of staff who had always been reasonably active along with others whose activity had waxed and waned over the years. Running was seen by participants as easy to fit into busy lives and a cheap option, one participant who travels for work every week takes her running gear with her. Other activities participants undertake included cycling, swimming, and mountain biking. Most were not involved in a running club. Three of the women started initially by saying they were not runners. Being a runner was equated with being competitive, running at a fast and steady pace and potentially coming first or high up the ranking. This was sometimes linked to early experiences of sport in school which was not always viewed as enjoyable.

Motivations for doing the Forestry 100 challenge

Being very closely involved in the Centenary activities was a motivation for two participants who both wanted to encourage and enable staff to get involved and wanted to lead by example. Getting out of the office and sometimes district to see other sites and meet other staff was also a motivation. Undertaking a challenge was also a significant motivation for the majority of participants as well as celebrating the centenary of the Forestry Commission.

'I never thought I would be able to do it and it was a real sense of achievement and when the opportunity came up to do the 10x10K runs at work I jumped at the chance. Not sure if that was good at the time, stupid or mad but I think it's definitely good' (Female)

'Although I am active, I have really enjoyed it and I think it's been a challenge and it gets me out and about and out of my comfort zone' (Male)

Once underway this motivated participants to carry out other runs and to keep training:

'It's addictive you do one and its fun then you do another and its fun then you think well I haven't anything on this week and then you start training runs in between, well if you're doing a training run you may as well do a proper one and get a medal for it' (Male)

'It keeps me motivated and I've really enjoyed it, as I think this year (without it) I just wouldn't have done anything. Just doing the runs themselves you think I must do something in terms of training' (Male)

Forest atmosphere and characteristics

The atmosphere of the runs was viewed very positively, with participants enjoying the forest scenery and the differences between the sites.

'Whinlatter was by far the most beautiful day and beautiful setting and just great but part of that was because the sun was out and it was fantastic.' (Male)

Each participant had a favourite run or site for different reasons; this could be to do with the weather too much heat was disliked, and rain could be refreshing; or it could be to do with the feel of a site, such as how peaceful it felt. The characteristics of the sites in terms of the amount of tree cover, open space and the route of the runs along wide forest tracks with large vistas or narrow trails also had an impact; with a preference for variety in the routes as



this meant participants had to focus on where they were placing their feet. It could also be of benefit in helping to take people's minds off how far they had left to run.

'I do prefer going down narrow trails as well when you have to think more about where you are going rather than seeing big vistas' (Female)

Everyone felt the events were well organised and that the staff and volunteers were very supportive and encouraging which helped them to keep going during a run. However, a few participants felt that the numbers attending the runs was somewhat disappointing at some of the sites, with not enough publicity to promote the running series. One participant suggested the ethos of the runs was similar to that of parkrun with people of all abilities taking part.

Benefits of the Forestry 100 challenge

Mental wellbeing benefits were mentioned by all, this was gained from running in training as well as at the events. Participants felt better after doing a run and sluggish if a run had been missed. Running was viewed as an opportunity to have some space to *'think about stuff'*.

'For me it's definitely a mental health thing that helps me the most, that feeling of escape and something about the rhythm of running and how that just makes the chaos in your head at the end of the day fall into line. And there's something about running outside in our beautiful forests you just get that sense of freedom' (Female)

One staff member also suggested that when running with other colleagues out of work it was easier to open up about any mental wellbeing issues such as anxieties. This was partly due to being out of the office environment but also the activity of running, which has less direct eye contact, and running side by side which provided an opportunity to be more open:

'So, I think it's really great that there are couch to 5K groups starting across Forestry England and the FC and stuff because maybe in those more informal out of the office settings staff will feel able to open up and seek support from their colleagues in a way that they wouldn't sat in an office' (Female)

All preferred running outdoors and running in forests, summed up nicely in these quotes:

'I love running in the forest, I always run off road now because I damaged both my Achilles a couple of years ago, so I don't run on the road anymore' (Female)

'The variation in the runs so one minute you are on the top of a very big hill like at Cannock and you can see over the whole forest, you can see for miles and you have this huge sense of awe and amazement. Then there are times when you are sheltered under the shade of the trees or running alongside a little river and it just feels, it just feels amazing to be running somewhere like that' (Female)

The physical side was mentioned more by the women in terms of feeling stronger:

'I just decided to take this challenge on, I trained and I loved it, I loved the feeling and how strong it made me feel. It has been amazing for my mental health' (Female)

However, the physical and mental were very much combined:



'I feel a lot stronger and a lot fitter, my endurance in terms of running and other classes I do during the week and has massively improved. But for me hands down it has definitely been the mental health side of things. And It's something that I'm really pleased I picked it up when I did because I am having a hard time at the moment and it's definitely a useful distraction. It's a really good way to do something positive and think positive and even when everything else is negative you can go out for a run and feel you have achieved something' (Female)

Being away from traffic was seen as beneficial, one participant in the North East where staff had carried out the couch to 5K and couch to 10K runs felt there was also friendly competitiveness between staff in the run; as well as encouragement and support:

'So many were just absolutely chuffed that everyone could do it. The few pictures of people coming across the line were quite emotive. There was one guy who had only done the couch to 5K and had never run a 10K in his life and he walked quite a lot of it, but everyone was there at the end cheering him on and giving him hugs. It was a really really lovely moment' (Female)

There was also a strong social element to running that could be important:

'I like running along chatting to be honest that is probably why I am not ever going to be very quick, so when I go with my friend, we talk the whole time' (Female)

Opportunities to get to know other Forestry Commission family colleagues, as well as staff within the same district was also important.

'I wouldn't have any reason to know you all without doing this. I think it's a really nice aspect... you get to meet a wider variety of colleagues from across the national estate and it helps to break barriers down' (Male)

There was also a shared sense of endeavour and achievement among the group doing ten runs particularly when dealing with difficult weather conditions, hilly sites, injuries. For those who live alone it can have an isolating effect so getting involved in a challenge such as this can be important as a means of catching up with others.

'It's been good for me to get out and socialise with people and it's been a good way to do that. If you spend time on something like this it gives you an incentive to do it and you mix socially with others' (Male)

Behaviour change

While participants were often stepping up their own level of physical activity, sometimes considerably, through doing the Forestry 100 challenge, all talked about encouraging other staff to get involved and apply for a free place to do one 10K run. In the North East a number of staff signed up to the couch to 5K and then couch to 10K runs, and as well as joining a parkrun they were also sometimes running after work: *'we have created a little informal running club really'*.

'We have a regular parkrun group now that we go out with on Saturdays and it's just been fantastic for everyone's wellbeing and I am really really passionate about that and exercising for your mind'. (Female)

For one participant a behaviour change was carrying out new runs in different forests as she felt she had got into a bit of a rut doing the same runs all the time. While another participant was changing his training to add in some hill running due to the hilly nature of some of the courses, and to make sure he did not get injured. Participants were also advocating the runs to other staff with one participant doing this at 'every staff event or beat visit'. The West England district has 3 couch to 5K groups, two in Coleford and one in Exeter for staff. Two of the Forestry 100 team were raising money for charity; one for a charity called Rethink, which supports people with mental illness and the other for the Alzheimer's Society.

As participants undertook more of the runs their focus on the challenge could change:

'It's good to have the encouragement between everyone here, cause at Bedgebury the first one I did I just wanted to get round, but since then I have wanted to get round in an hour and I did that today which was amazing' (Female)

They also felt that there was more discussion in some of the forest offices about the runs which spurred staff onto apply for a free place when tickets were re-opened for staff in August 2019.

'I think that has been quite nice about the series especially re-opening the staff places as we did get staff who signed up based on chatting to other colleagues who said you should do it' (Female)

There was also a desire to mark the last run at Jeskyns Community Woodland in December 2019 with a celebration, and this took place with a special centenary cake and awards for the runners both for staff doing the Forestry 100 challenge but also for a small number of members of the public who undertook the challenge as well.

The pressure to complete the Forestry 100 challenge

Participants talked about feeling some pressure to complete all the runs, but this was not necessarily viewed negatively. One person stated she was doing another of the 10K runs so that if she was injured, she would be able to miss one run but still have completed ten in total.

'At the start I was a bit apprehensive, can I actually do this, I definitely feel like I haven't trained enough, but I feel much more confident now going to the runs' (Female)

One participant tasked with promoting and encouraging people to get involved in the Forestry 100 series outlined how she was deliberately not carrying out a lot of communication related to those doing Forestry 100 challenge, so as not to put pressure on those staff. She also felt some pressure herself in ensuring that staff enjoyed the runs. The pressure could change over time as participants wanted to improve and beat their previous run times or personal bests. This was not always possible as some of the sites were more undulating and hillier, meaning runs could take longer.

Time and commitment

Running ten 10Ks is a commitment both in terms of the time taken to travel to the different sites, but also the cost of staying overnight for the early morning runs.

'It has been difficult at times when you have a long way to go, as it does take up a whole weekend. Not that that it is a bad thing because I will go biking the day before or after the run' (Female)

'I have enjoyed the excuse to travel to places that I wouldn't necessarily travel to, but it is hard with other commitments, I have missed a couple of family things so that is a bit tricky' (Female)

One participant was conscious of his carbon footprint in travelling to the different forest sites, outlining how it was not possible to use public transport to get to many of the forest sites.

Ideas for a future running series

Better publicity for the runs was thought to be essential in any future running series. Participants felt that a running series needed to have some time to establish and build a reputation for itself. The timing of the runs at either 9am or 4pm was felt to be somewhat difficult; 10am was viewed as more 'social'. The date of a few runs was also felt to be a bit problematic when they were held on three consecutive weekends; as was the case in both Spring and Autumn. One participant felt that a run once a month would be more sensible particularly for people who might want to do more than one run. Making a weekend of running was an idea that many felt was a good one with different run lengths from 1K, 3K, 5K and 10K to potentially a half marathon, and with stalls for food and gear. It was felt this would make the event more of a day or weekend out. However, overall 10K was felt to be a good distance, enough to get people to carry out some training and be a challenge but without being too onerous. It was also felt that there was a staff appetite for involvement in physical activity as part of a broader focus on staff wellbeing.

In conclusion the Forestry 100 team relished the challenge in terms of their own fitness, but also spent time encouraging other staff to give one of the runs a try. Travel and accommodation to reach the sites was a bigger challenge than some had thought initially. However, making a weekend of the runs and combining this with other activity was enjoyed. A real sense of team camaraderie built up between the runners with each providing encouragement, support and inspiration to the others at the runs, and sometimes helping in sharing travel to the sites. At the final 10K staff dressed up in festive costumes to celebrate and have fun. Two staff have collected £1330 in total for two charities. All the team now think of themselves more as runners than they did previously, and everyone gained a real sense of pride in their achievement. There were many notable moments in beautiful forests and a shared sense of purpose that will last in the teams' memories.

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Funding: Forestry England and Sport England

Web: <https://www.forestresearch.gov.uk/research/active-forest-programme-evaluation/>

