

Parkrun runners: Whinlatter, Delamere and Bedgebury Forests

As part of the Forestry England and Sport England 'Active Forests' programme a focus group was undertaken virtually with the same people on three separate occasions in 2021 (March, July, November) to explore changes to people's activities and forest access during the various Covid-19 restrictions from lockdown to various stages of easing. 2-7 people participated in each focus group. Four women and three men.



March 2021

In March 2021 people could leave home for exercise outdoors with others from their own household or one other person. Parkrun has been cancelled in late March 2020. Participants talked about missing it, but some were undertaking non-park run activity, which was running with a buddy. One person was greatly missing his trips to Whinlatter and the more varied terrain the forest offered:

I've been stuck to running the very tedious fenland roads. I did a 14k run last week and it had 23 feet of ascent in 14k, which is not something I'm terribly happy with. (Male, Whinlatter Forest)

The majority of participants were trying to continue with some form of running or exercise but not all, and motivations were sometimes felt to be difficult without the social connections provided by parkrun.

I'm afraid I haven't been running since the parkruns has stopped. I'm afraid I have put on quite a lot of weight so I'm going to have to start practising. (Female, Bedgebury)

July 2021

At the end of May 2021, the Covid restrictions were eased and up to thirty people could meet up outdoors. The participants felt that things were a bit more back to normal in July particularly in terms of outdoor activity. The focus group ran a week or so before parkrun started again at the forest sites after nearly one and a half years. All of the participants were looking forward to it and some had volunteered in a parkrun practice in which Covid secure measures had been put in place. Participants who used the forests regularly also noticed more people

coming back to the forest sites, the cafes reopening and more people starting to meet up with others for outdoor activities.

The participants were also enthusiastic about Forestry England and particularly some of the changes made to encourage and enable access at Whinlatter Forest.

We are great fans of FE, we feel we know staff as well as they get involved in parkrun which is nice and it builds a nice sense of identity (Male, Whinlatter)

November 2021

In November there were no specific restrictions in England, but a new Covid-19 variant was identified and there were increasing discussions about further restrictions being put in place, which occurred in December 2021. All the participants were pleased to be back undertaking parkrun as a runner or volunteer. They outlined that parkrun numbers at the sites were not back to pre-Covid levels and thought this might be for a range of reasons including nervousness about Covid, changes in habits, and the anti-Covid measures put in place to reduce risk.

The social connections with other parkrun runners were again brought to the fore as an important and enjoyable part of parkrun, particularly after not being able to meet up with many other parkrun friends and acquaintances for so long.

I grew up in Northampton and a few weeks ago at Whinlatter, when I was running it, there was a chap with a Northampton running club t-shirt on and it turned out he lived just around the corner from where I grew up. It's amazing the connections and friendships you make through parkrun, it's just tremendous. (Male, Whinlatter)

Participants still talked about noticing nature more than before Covid and this was continuing, with them talking about noticing wildlife, flowers, and trees.

I like to see deciduous woodland, particularly natives. One of my favourite trees is the Scots Pine and we've got a load of those at Delamere and there's a little very short section you walk through that's an absolute joy. I think deciduous is good. (Female, Delamere)

There was a sense of relief as the Covid restrictions started to reduce and people were feeling some semblance of normality. Parkrun had been greatly missed and all were very pleased about its return whether they ran or volunteered. There was some discussion about whether numbers at parkrun would return to pre-Covid levels as the group felt some people's habits may have changed or they were still nervous about meeting up with others.

Funding: Sport England and Forestry Commission England

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