

Stroll and Stretch, National Forest

Participants gained a range of benefits from joining this group, including increased social connections, connecting more with nature, increasing physical activity levels and building stretching and mindfulness practices into their everyday lives. Many intend to build regular walks at the Forest into their routines.

This case study focuses on the Stroll and Stretch group at Hick's Lodge in the National Forest, located on an ex-colliery site in the East Midlands. A researcher joined the group on one occasion in February 2025. The case study is based on conversations and observations during the activity in addition to a focus group held immediately afterwards at the Forest, which involved two activity leaders and six participants (5 female, 1 male; all were aged 55 or over, retired and White British).



Stroll and Stretch at Hick's Lodge

This activity has been run in the National Forest since summer 2024. It is available to those who self-refer, as well as to those referred via social prescribing. Participants sign up to take part in a block of 8 weekly sessions, but can attend as many blocks as they like: they are required to book their place at each session. It is delivered by Wild Minds, a local Community Interest Company that delivers a programme of activities in the area, including other Feel Good in the Forest activities. It is usually led by one person and comprises a gentle walk at the pace of the slowest walker, following one of two circular routes – one through an area of birch woodland, and the other around a lake surrounded by pasture – on an accessible path. Each route is approximately 2.5 km. The walk includes two pauses: at the first, the leader takes the group through a series of gentle stretches and balance exercises; and at the second, the group is invited to pause in silence for 30 seconds to be present in the moment and pay attention to what they can see and/or hear in the Forest. The walk lasts for an hour and runs whatever the weather, unless the Forest is closed. The activity is free to participants, who also receive 3 hours free parking when they attend (worth £8.50). There is no local bus route to the Forest.

Participation in the activity

The focus group was held halfway through the block of sessions; none of the participants had taken part in any of the previous blocks. Since joining this group, several had gone on to take part in 'taster sessions' for other activities run by Wild Minds in the National Forest, such as nature journalling. Some participants have met up for a walk even when a session hasn't been running and may meet before or after the official walk to go for their own walk, sometimes visiting the café afterwards.

Motivations

One participant talked about joining as a step towards becoming more active. Some joined because they wanted to take part in a social activity and hoped to meet like-minded people. One joined based on the positive experience her daughter had, who took part in a different activity at the site.

Participants mentioned that being part of the group – and having their own positive experiences of this – encouraged their continued participation. Several talked about the importance of having a scheduled activity to go to, providing them with a reason to get up and leave the house in the morning, regardless of the weather. Although participants are asked to commit to the whole block of sessions, and to book onto each one, there is flexibility and participants feel that there is no disincentive to join the other sessions if they have to miss one.

"I find it so relaxed and friendly, I just want to come back for more."

"Having a purpose, getting out when the weather is not so great. You know, because you're thinking, I know it will be alright, because [the leader] will be there and everybody else will be there, and it will be nice to catch up."

Barriers to participation

Although the activities are already promoted in a range of ways, participants talked about finding it difficult to find out about activities going on in the area, even when searching online.

Several talked about how attending activities like this on your own can be daunting, and the group agreed that it was a brave thing to do; and that it may not be for people that aren't comfortable in social settings.

Some said that not knowing what to expect could be off-putting, but that making the activity free to attend, and offering free taster sessions, takes the risk out of participating in something new.

"I thought, why not give it a go? It's something new. But if you've got to pay for that, you wouldn't do it."

For those new to, or returning to, physical activity, knowing the distance covered in the walk in advance could act as a deterrent: the leaders deliberately don't mention this beforehand.

Although the leaders provide broad guidance to participants about suitable footwear and clothing on registration, some participants talked about not being sure exactly what would be appropriate before attending for the first time.

Activity timing can restrict participation: retired people tend to prefer activities to be held during the week, to fill their weekdays and avoid interfering with weekend activities such as seeing family, whilst those in work tend to be available at different times.

Benefits of doing this activity in a forest environment

Some talked about how the sessions left them feeling “more energised”. Participants valued the social aspects of the group, and how this encourages them to spend more time at the Forest than they otherwise might. Several talked about how chatting with others as they walked distracted them from the distance they were covering. The Forest provides particular opportunities for participants to connect with nature, whilst practising mindfulness during the session.

“I think the social aspects, the physical, the mental and emotional. There are so many benefits. You know, being outside, being in nature, being with other people.”

“The way the session is structured, as well, with that stopping and looking at things, it just kind of connects you to nature. And obviously having the forestry environment, that facilitates that even more.”

Changes after taking part

The majority of participants hadn’t visited the Forest before joining the organised activities, but by taking part and starting to build new routines of walking in the Forest, some talked about their intention to continue walking there on the same days with other participants, even after the activity finishes.

The activity provides participants with an opportunity to do something they wouldn’t normally do, and some talked about ‘doing their homework’ outside of sessions, incorporating stretching more into their daily life and noticing how they’re feeling, as well as nature and their surroundings, more. Safety was a concern for some participants, however their growing familiarity with the site and the routes had led some to feel more confident in visiting outside the group sessions.

“You try and kind of just have it at the forefront of your mind. [...] It does help, on a day-to-day basis, with your flexibility.”

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More information about the monitoring and evaluation of the Active Forests programme, including additional case studies, is available at

<https://www.forestresearch.gov.uk/research/active-forests-programme-evaluation-pilot-phase/active-forests-programme-reports-and-publications/>

For further information contact Liz O’Brien: liz.obrien@forestresearch.gov.uk