

Wellbeing walk, Hamsterley Forest

- This established group walk attracts a large number of regular participants
 - The walk is social and inclusive, achievable but challenging, and provides participants with opportunities to explore the forest and walk further than they would alone
- This case study focuses on the weekly wellbeing walk at Hamsterley Forest in County Durham.
 - The researchers joined the group on one occasion in March 2024 for a walk covering approximately 6km and lasting 1 hour 40 minutes. 25 people took part in the walk: 19 were female and 6 were male; 18 were aged over 65 and none were aged under 35.
 - This case study is based on observations made during the activity in addition to conversations with thirteen participants (10 female, 3 male) during a focus group held in person at the forest.



Wellbeing walks at Hamsterley Forest

This group walk is run as part of a local initiative coordinated by Durham County Council, with funding from Public Health England. The initiative, called 'Thrive Leisure'¹, aims to support local people on their health and fitness journey by offering a range of ways to help them get and keep moving. 'Move Walking' is part of the programme and currently includes over 40 different organised walks across the county. The 'Move Walk' at Hamsterley is a 90 minute wellbeing walk, which started in June 2022. Walk leaders have completed The Ramblers Wellbeing Walk² training, delivered by Durham County Council staff, and are insured under the scheme. This group walk runs every Monday morning and is led by a local resident with extensive knowledge of the forest, who plans all the walks; the Active Forest Coordinator co-leads and provides support, often as the tail walker. Walks are only cancelled in the event of extreme bad weather, and normally around 20 people attend each walk. Participants tend to be older adults, mostly female, though some occasionally bring adult children or young grandchildren. Some walkers bring their dogs. Most of those joining the walks are regulars and a few have walked with the group since its beginning. The walk is promoted on site, via social media, local newsletters and the Thrive programme. It has a dedicated WhatsApp group.

¹ For more information about Thrive, see https://thriveleisure.co.uk/index.php/thrive_news_item/thrive-your-way/

² For more information about The Ramblers Wellbeing Walks, see <https://www.ramblers.org.uk/go-walking/wellbeing-walks>

Motivations

The walks are considered by participants to cover an achievable distance, unlike some walks organised by other groups; they are also felt to be sufficiently challenging, encouraging participants to walk further than they would alone. One attraction is the variety of routes, reflecting the leader's local knowledge and their efforts to regularly plan new routes for the group; some participants said they would not find those routes on their own, they would just stick to the coloured waymarked routes. One relative newcomer to the group is not involved in any other activities, and joined because she wants to get active and improve her health on the recommendation of her doctor. Some joined the walk because it was recommended to them, and they have since recommended it to others. The social element of the walk was a motivation for some: "*you meet such interesting people.*" One participant, who always joins the walk with her partner, talked about how walks like this give them the opportunity to get some 'breathing space' from each other: "*you know, you're going together, but you're walking separately and you're just getting rid of your day-to-day stuff*". This is one of the 'Move Walks' that allows dogs, which is an attraction for some participants, who bring their dogs.

"We had seen the photographs, you know, when they put them on the social. It looked like a lovely group, it's a big group, you know, I'm sure everybody would be so friendly."

"It's the best one, it's my favourite."

Experiences of taking part

Participants talked about how important the social aspects of the walk are, and how friendly and welcoming the group is: "*it's certainly the nicest social group I've ever been in [...]* You feel supported and that's rare". However, they also said "*there's no pressure*" to talk to anyone if you do not want to, and the group is especially good for people "*going through things*". Leaders make efforts to ensure that everyone is included. Some meet up socially outside the scheduled walks, and if regulars miss the walks for a while, others notice and encourage them to return. The group includes people who walk at a range of different paces, but the leaders accommodate everyone by including regular pauses to keep the group together.

"You come on a walk like this with people who are chatting with you, and you suddenly think, crikey, we've done three and a half miles, where did that go?"

"If anybody is struggling, you know, the line is checked and they wait for you, they have a breather and then you move on. There's no feeling of, you know, well, you're not as good as the others, so go on, get a move on, kind of thing. That means a lot. Every kind of walker is included."

"I think it helps your mental health [...]

You do a walk, and you feel so much better. You do this at the end and, you know, it's social, you're making friends."

Benefits of doing this activity in the forest environment

The participant who was recommended to increase their fitness shared their dislike of gyms, and said they prefer to go for a group walk in the forest. Participants talked about how important it is to them to find walks in a safe environment like this, and how the characteristics of the forest, with its surfaced paths, “*is a life saver*” meaning that they can walk year-round, whatever the weather. Others talked about how the lack of stiles and busy roads to cross means “*there is very little to distract you or stress you out*”, compared to group walks in other locations. Some participants talked about how walking in a forest can be “*a little more daunting than walking in open countryside*”: there can be no landmarks and no phone signal, and “*with it all being trees, they all start looking alike, these trees*”. However, walking in a group like this, with experienced leaders who know the forest well, including a back marker, helps them to feel “*settled*”, knowing they cannot get lost, giving them the confidence to walk there.

“It’s not the same wandering around the forest in among a load of trees on your own, so it’s nice to be part of a group.”

“I don’t think I’d ever get bored with here.”

“For forests in general, you don’t realise you’ve been on that path before.”

“Just being in the fresh air, you just feel better [...] last week I felt great for the rest of the day.”

Activity levels after taking part

Participants talked about how the wellbeing walk had become part of their routine; some talked about liking “*the discipline of it*”, of having a scheduled walk for a set distance and time, and said they plan to keep coming for as long as they can. The walk typically attracts a range of people, including some “*keep fitters*” who are already active. Many of the participants walk regularly and take part in a range of other organised walking activities: for some this includes other walks in the Move programme, as well as walking on their own. The leader also runs a fortnightly ‘friends walk’, which 3-5 regulars from the wellbeing walk attend. For some, part of the attraction of the wellbeing walk – as well as the many benefits outlined earlier – is that participants can park free of charge and get a free hot drink and a biscuit afterwards. Although some do visit the forest at other times and some have purchased a membership, others said they wouldn’t consider going at another time: “*I wouldn’t now think of coming another day and paying [...] What walk could we do better than one of [the leader’s] walks?*”

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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/>

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