

NHS Enhance training day, Thetford Forest

- The training day emphasised how the nature-based activities available through the Active Forests programme can be an important element of the wider system of provision to meet a local population's health and care needs.
- This event has catalysed a range of further activity, including plans to deliver similar events in different regions participating in the NHS Enhance programme. Several further opportunities to promote Active Forests across the NHS have been identified.

- This case study focuses on a collaboration between Active Forests and the NHS Enhance programme, which held a training day for health professionals at Thetford Forest in the East of England in November 2023.
- This case study is based on interviews with two NHS employees involved in planning and delivering the training day.



About the Enhance programme

Since 2022, the NHS has been piloting a professional development programme called 'Enhancing Generalist Skills', also known as 'Enhance'. It aims to equip healthcare professionals with the skills they need to deliver excellent person-centred care, as well as the skills needed to become future healthcare leaders. Its ambition is to help participating healthcare professionals understand their role within the wider health and care system and be a more holistic clinician, less focused solely on working within the silos associated with their specialism.

The Enhance pilot has established seven 'regional trailblazer' sites, of which the East of England is one. This particular trailblazer has focused on doctors in their first years of work, pharmacists, physicians' associates and dentists.

The Enhance programme comprises six modules, each of which includes both online learning materials and an in-person 'hub' day. The training day held at Thetford Forest was associated with the module on systems working, which focuses on building an understanding of local networks and resources and how healthcare professionals could work with them to help meet the local population's health and care needs. Through Enhance, healthcare professionals are encouraged to gain experience of interventions and services that they may refer patients onto, to help them understand what is available and how to work better together.

About the training day

The Enhance East of England trailblazer team sought suggestions from participating health professionals for an experience day for the systems working module. Wilderness medicine was one suggestion; whilst this would not be possible to pursue given resource constraints, a more local woodland-based experience day was within scope. Thetford Forest was identified as a possible venue due to its location in the region and its facilities.

The Enhance team set out to find information about any wellbeing-related activities being delivered at the forest. The discovery of a job advertisement on the Forestry England website that mentioned wellbeing led to the team finding out about the Active Forests programme. After initial conversations with the named contacts from that job advertisement, the Enhance team identified that Active Forests could provide a good case study for their module on systems working, with its emphasis on improving physical health and wellbeing through a range of nature-based activities and engagement with social prescribing initiatives.

Plans for the training day were developed and delivered as a collaboration between the Enhance team and the Active Forests team. The programme for the day comprised a combination of indoor and outdoor activities, including opportunities for participating health professionals to take part in some of the activities and gain an insight into their potential to benefit patients' physical health and wellbeing.

The day began with an overview of the Active Forests programme followed by participation in disc golf at the site. The group then heard about the range of activities available at Thetford Forest, their potential benefits to physical and mental health, and how social prescribing and self-referral fits into the wider Active Forests programme. Following lunch and networking, half of the group participated in a sound nature trail whilst the other half participated in a mindfulness journaling activity. The health professionals were then assigned to one of six groups and were tasked with developing a nature-based social prescribing project aimed at responding to their local population's health and care needs, tailoring this to their local area. These project ideas were then presented to the wider group in a 'dragon's den' activity, and the group voted for a winner. The group activity was intended to help participants think through the practicalities of planning for, resourcing and setting up a nature-based referral initiative.

The training day was delivered at High Lodge in Thetford Forest. Two representatives from the Active Forests programme were involved in planning and delivery: one from the national programme and the other, the local Active Forests coordinator. Three people involved in Enhance programme delivery attended, as well as a representative from Health Education England. Around 30 health professionals participated in the day: the majority were foundation level 2 doctors (i.e. doctors in their second year of work), but the group also included a pharmacist.

Impacts on participating health professionals

Feedback was sought from health professionals via a survey following participation in the day. This feedback was predominantly positive; negative comments focused on the length of the journey some participants were required to make to attend, given the size of the region covered by the East of England Enhance trailblazer.

Participants reported feeling that their mood improved, their stress levels reduced, and they felt relaxed following participation in the day. They *“talked about how driving into the forest and parking in the forest, and then sort of walking to your destination, you arrived at the conference centre very calm, you sort of left your stress on that drive up.”*

One of the interviewees suggested that experience days like this could be one means of responding to burnout within the NHS: *“I think if we can do more things like this, it encourages them to go out and actually spend some time just outdoors decompressing themselves. Because they can be like, oh, actually, yeah, we’re using this for patients, why are we not putting ourselves first here, actually, and just taking ourselves out for a walk and going into nature?”*

Through experiencing these benefits, participants started to think about which of their patients could benefit from something similar.

“They felt it was a real... being in nature was a huge boon to their personal mental health. And experiencing that and the relaxation. Someone comments specifically saying actually just physically being in nature and hearing the sounds of the forest made them feel so far away from work and their worries and their stress from work. And then they were able to engage and learn things there, was quite an unusual bit for them, but that made quite an impact on, OK, well, I can then pass this on to people.”

One of the interviewees reflected that health professionals do not tend to do much physical learning, so this opportunity to experience forest-based activities directly *“was quite revolutionary for a lot of people, and there was a real buzz in the room”*.

The group’s experience on the training day helped participants collectively understand the potential that encouraging patients to increase their levels of activity in the forest could have, compared to more traditional advice.

“So someone would say, actually this is quite interesting because if you were needing to lose a lot of weight, the idea of going to a gym is very difficult. But the idea of going to start doing some more walks with your dog in a forest feels less intimidating. [...] And that sparked a real conversation of people saying actually, that really makes sense.”

This collaborative training day was considered by some participants to not only meet their learning objectives about systems working, but also to provide a good example of how this works in practice. As one health professional said in their feedback, *“Partnering with Forestry England was excellent to show what can be achieved when the NHS partners with different organisations.”*

Potential impacts on people referred via social prescribing

During the training day, participants discussed some key groups that could benefit from nature-based activities in the forest. Women were considered a key audience, following discussion of *“data about how women feel much more confident exercising in a group in a forest environment than they might in a public park on their own”*. New mothers were suggested as another key audience, given that the demands of looking after a baby can mean that exercise is less of a priority, yet can still be an important way of managing post-partum depression; *“prescribing movement rather than exercise with young mothers, that might work quite well”*. Encouraging young people to take part in structured group activities in the forest was suggested as a way to help reduce their risk of involvement in violence and gang culture. Other groups that could benefit, suggested by the interviewees, included people with mental health issues, for whom group-based activities may be particularly beneficial; those living with addiction, who would benefit from gentle exercise in a group setting; and the elderly, especially people in early retirement and those experiencing memory problems, who would also likely benefit from group activity outdoors. Parkinson’s disease and dementia patients were also suggested as key groups that would benefit from gentle movement outdoors.

Challenges of prescribing activities in nature

Interviewees identified four main challenges. First, it can be difficult to know what is available to prescribe to people, though increasingly social prescribing link workers are working in the NHS to respond to this. However, health professionals like the doctors taking part in the training day often like to have a good understanding of what is involved in whatever they are prescribing and be able to talk patients through it, but are extremely time poor, have very little time to spend with patients and also have little time to spend finding out about these kinds of opportunities. *“As a healthcare professional, day-to-day, I don’t think we have the time or the headspace to kind of learn about other aspects.”* It is also difficult for patients to know what is available to them to self-refer onto: *“I think the key thing is people knowing what’s there and how to access it.”*

Second, this mode of operation differs from how health professionals typically work: *“we’re very used to that, referring to another professional who is in clinic on those days, that makes sense to us. The minute it’s ringing someone outside the system or asking your patient to self-refer to this area, you feel like you’re maybe losing that control.”* The referral system also varies from one place to another.

Third, self-referral could be a barrier for some patients. *“There’s lots of people that works really well for, and it works much better for them than us making them an appointment, but there are huge groups in the UK who are really used to healthcare equals doctor refers you to someone, you get a letter, and you go to it.”*

Finally, patients may be actively seeking a medical intervention. *“There are people that want to be medicalised, and if they get as far as seeing a doctor, they want a prescription, they don’t want to be told, go for a walk. They want something a bit more, that confirms that they’re unwell.”*

Potential impacts on the health system

By raising awareness of the opportunity for nature-based interventions to help support patients' physical and mental health, the training day has the potential to contribute to reducing demand on the NHS over time. *"A lot of the population, they don't necessarily have a medical need. They have a need for belonging and for being social or for being active. And none of that needs a doctor [...] but people end up coming to the NHS because they don't know where else to go";* for these people, promoting nature-based activities *"gets people out, it makes people healthier, reduces the NHS' burden."*

The doctors participating in the Enhance programme work two days a week in a community setting such as a GP surgery, whilst the rest of their time is spent working in a hospital. This means that participants were potentially able to immediately apply what they learnt in their work. *"They can be really mindful of it when they're seeing their patients [...] the ones that are in their GP surgery or the people that are coming to the Emergency Department that are reasonably well, but the environment around them doesn't support their mental health, they've got nowhere else to go so they come into [the Emergency Department]."* Providing health professionals with a dedicated opportunity to learn about and experience these activities is particularly important, given the time pressures associated with their core work which would otherwise make it unlikely for many of them to find out about this once their training has completed.

It is hoped that the training day, especially the dragon's den group activity, will inspire the participating health professionals to set up something in their local area to benefit their local population.

"If we're introducing them at least to the ideas and saying, well, what could you do? Could you look at, just within your GP practice for the six months you're there, how often did we prescribe activity, movement? Actually, maybe in three years time, they're going to remember that and say, OK, well, now I'm a junior GP at this place, I'd really like to set up a system. And actually, as they go, you know, I think if we get people early as they go through their careers, they're more likely to use those skills to make a change. And I think we'll see a more sustained and more substantial change by hitting people early. [...] I think it makes a huge difference, but it's a huge difference that will take a long time to see and the things we'll see will be subtle, but the change in attitude is vital."

Working with Forestry England to deliver the training

The interviewees were extremely positive about their experience of working with Forestry England to plan and deliver the training day, and the quality of the learning experience they helped to provide. Based on feedback received after the training, participants were also very positive about the day.

The location of the training day in a forest was an important element of its success:

"It's very immersive, it's subtle, you don't realize the effect it's having on you. I can't think of many team learning environments that wouldn't be enhanced by going into it [the forest] because people are naturally relaxed, they're naturally engaged in the world around them. You know, it is the opposite of sitting in a bland conference room, isn't it? You have to engage with the area, and you can't help but feel relaxed and calmed and destressed."

Wi-fi was not available during the training day and plans had to be adapted on the day, once the Enhance team realised. Despite the challenge this posed, the lack of wi-fi was considered, on the whole, to be a positive: "*there wasn't then lots of tech distractions*" and not being able to research options for the group activity meant that "*they had to do some making up and some really good, like, thinking on their feet, so I think actually it was really beneficial.*"

Opportunities

"Everyone who encountered this went, oh it'd be brilliant if there was something like that in my patch. And we were saying there will be, you need to go and find it."

Given the success of this training day, the East of England Enhance team are keen to run it again as part of the systems working module in subsequent years. Others involved in Enhance delivery are also planning to run similar events: a training day is being planned for trainee psychiatrists in the East of England, and the Enhance team in Yorkshire & The Humber are also planning to collaborate with Active Forests for one of their experience days. It was suggested that Active Forests could be a good case study for other topics covered in the Enhance programme, such as complex comorbidity or population health, not just systems working. Active Forests representatives have been invited to speak at a national Enhance programme meeting, and the Enhance team is planning to present on their activities, including this collaboration, at a national medical education conference.

The interviewees suggested several opportunities to promote Active Forests more widely across the NHS, such as proactively engaging with social prescribers, GP commissioning groups and GP partners; those involved in surgery and anaesthesia (noting the opportunity to frame participation in nature-based activities as a means of reducing risks associated with surgery); those working in mental health, cardiology and geriatric medicine; those directly involved in discharging patients from hospital; and charities such as Age UK, Dementia UK and Parkinson's Disease UK, which engage with the NHS to advocate on behalf of their patients.

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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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