

## Walk & Talk 999 group, Sherwood Pines

- This award-winning group provides a safe space for local men employed by the Fire & Rescue service to share their experiences and difficulties, in a mutually supportive setting.
- Delivering this in the form of a gentle walk in a forest setting provides additional health and wellbeing benefits, whilst also strengthening social connections and providing an initial safety net for anyone struggling.

This case study focuses on the Walk & Talk 999 group at Sherwood Pines. The researcher joined the group in November 2024 for a special celebratory walk held on the group's first anniversary. This case study is based on walking interviews with five participants and one of the leaders during the group walk. In total we spoke to six men, all aged 40 and over. Five had retired and one was in work. All were of White British ethnicity.



### Walk & Talk 999 at Sherwood Pines

The walk at Sherwood Pines is one of 14 that are run across the country as part of the '[Walk & Talk 999](#)' programme, set up in 2021 by individuals in the London Fire Brigade. The programme runs regular walks for those working in the blue light, NHS and Military Services, led by their peers. Walk & Talk 999 targets men, responding to the statistic that men account for three quarters of deaths by suicide and recognising that the male population experiences particular barriers to seeking help and talking about their emotions. It acknowledges that these challenges are particularly acute for those working in the emergency and military services.

The group at Sherwood Pines was set up in November 2023 by a member of the Nottinghamshire Fire & Rescue Service, who leads the walks with a retired member of the Service. It is primarily for current and previous male members of the Service and it is considered one of the most successful Walk & Talk 999 groups in terms of participant numbers, which can range from 5 to 17. It is also award-winning: the leaders were recently presented with the Fire Chief's award for Valuing People. The walks are advertised as a safe space for participants to share any challenges they are experiencing in their professional or personal life. They start with coffee, which is followed by a briefing that reiterates the purpose of the group walk, before they set off. Walks usually last for around an hour and run fortnightly, regardless of the weather.

## Participation in the activity

Most of those we spoke to were regular visitors to Sherwood Pines outside of the group activity, though one participant said they do not usually visit apart from joining these walks. Most had been taking part in these organised walks since the group began a year ago and typically attended most sessions. One interviewee joined more recently and attended the walks less regularly. None of the participants interviewed took part in any other similar group activities.

The walk leaders make an effort to chat to all participants at some point during the walk and typically, participants may chat to several different people during the activity. Participants are open to supporting each other by listening and sharing similar experiences during the walks. Where appropriate, if another participant shares a difficult issue in conversation, they may mention this to one of the leaders who can signpost them to further sources of support. There is no requirement to open up about any challenges participants may be experiencing, and some regular attendees have not yet done this during a walk.

"If somebody comes along here for the first time, guys are rubbish at talking to each other [...] they won't actually talk about how they feel. However, if you come along and you see a familiar face, and that's what these guys are [...] all of a sudden, some of those barriers get broken down and they can come along and just open up. They don't necessarily open up that first time."

## Motivations

Many of the interviewees initially participated due to an existing connection: with one of the leaders; with other participants; or with work. The walks are specifically promoted to current and ex-members of the local Fire & Rescue service and many of the participants have worked with each other at some point in their career. One interviewee talked about how the long shifts associated with working in the Fire & Rescue Service meant that staff may spend more waking hours with their colleagues than with their families, and that leaving the Service can be an abrupt transition. In some cases, the walks can provide an impetus to leave the house following retirement though others maintain busy schedules.

Although the activity is physical, physical activity is not the main driver for those participating in the walks. Interviewees talked about how the walks provide an opportunity to take a break from their home life and to maintain their social connections with their peers. Some also talked about how the walks provide space for them to share difficult experiences with others who they know will understand, and how they deliberately make themselves available to listen to others that may want to talk about things they are struggling with during and after the walks.

"Because it's really good for what we do, as a fire service, to talk with people who understand what we do."

"I think a lot of folks will just have someone, somewhere, that they can talk to, but not everybody has got that outlet [...] and they just say something, then it's... it's a support group, isn't it?"

## Barriers to participation

Some participants suggested that the walk could be better promoted, although this is one of the most well-attended walks in the Walk and Talk 999 series. Concerns about not knowing other participants or not feeling comfortable in group social situations were barriers that some interviewees had overcome when joining initially. Some suggested that the walks may be off-putting to those who are less able to walk quickly or far, but efforts are made to ensure that the walks are inclusive, splitting into two groups based if required. Participants receive free parking, but the cost of parking on-site outside these walks was suggested as a potential barrier to repeat visits outside of the group setting.

## Benefits of doing this activity in a forest environment

Interviewees talked about enjoying spending time outdoors and how time in nature helps them to unwind and de-stress, with some talking about enjoying seeing wildlife and feeling closer to nature whilst at the site. Several participants brought their dogs with them; some interviewees said that the walks provide an opportunity for the dogs to socialise with each other as well as their owners, with the added benefit that the dogs can run off lead without endangering themselves. The facilities available at Sherwood Pines were mentioned by a few participants, including the accessible paths and café, encouraging visits in all weathers.

“any jobs you’ve got building up in the back of your head that you’ve got to get done, I can’t do it because I’m here, so, it just eases that, just makes you feel better within yourself, I think”

“you’ve got no phone signal, so no one can bother you - that’s the ultimate one”

## Changes after taking part

All those interviewed talked about already being physically active prior to joining the group, including some combination of regular walking, cycling or attending fitness classes, though two interviewees said that the frequency of their visits to the site had increased.

Most interviewees mentioned how joining the group had provided them with access to a support network that they felt they could both benefit from and contribute to.

“If you have got a problem, you can just say to one of them [...] And they’ll do their best to sort it out for you. So, you do know that if you need something that they’re there to help you.”

This research is funded by Sport England and Forestry England.

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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