

Gentle exercise, Chopwell Wood

- Gentle exercise supports, particularly older, people who need to improve their mobility.
- Participants stated that they benefited physically, mentally and socially from participating.
- The regular activity motivated participants to continue to exercise.

- This case study focuses on a gentle exercise group at Chopwell Wood in Northeast England. The researcher joined the group whilst they undertook their activity on one occasion in July 2025.
- This case study is based on observations made during the activity in addition to conversations with seven participants during an in-person focus group following the activity.
- We spoke to six women and one man from the surrounding area. The group tends to include older participants.



The Gentle exercise group at Chopwell Wood

The gentle exercise group have been meeting every Tuesday for about 4 years. The exercises last for forty-five minutes. There are seated and standing options at the session which supports participants to undertake various functional exercises including squats, stand ups, and raising the arms. Participants also do some band resistance work to support muscle development. The aim is to enable those who are older, have mobility issues, are new to exercise, or have not been exercising in recent years to start to improve and become more mobile.

Motivations

Participants identified different motivations for their involvement in the group. These largely centred around being able to take part in an activity that improved their mobility, was social as it provided an opportunity to meet others and was not pressured.

"...I had a moderate stroke a few years ago, so this is great for me. I was advised by the doctors ..."

"you never feel under pressure to do anything"

Participants are encouraged to do what they can during the sessions, and they appreciated that the activity was for all abilities. The regular nature of the activity and the social aspects, which made participants feel committed to keep returning, also motivated them to continue attending.

"a sort of easier way to get in some exercise"

"...something I look forward to on a Tuesday"

They also talked about how welcoming everybody was when they started and that the supportive and social environment also contributed to their motivation.

"maybe if you've had a bad week or bad time, then you get chatting, feel a lot, lot better afterwards"

Benefits of doing this activity in the forest environment

As the exercise is seated it takes place indoors in the forest. However, participants have to drive through the forest to reach this, and they enjoyed looking at the trees and being active in an attractive environment. One of the participants said *"hey, it's tranquil, isn't it?"*, at one session they also saw a deer out of the window, and they enjoyed seeing the change in the wood through the seasons. One person described coming to the forest an hour before the session to have their lunch and relax. The social aspects of the exercise were a motivation to attend but also a strong benefit, along with feelings of better mental health. As the exercise is gentle people could chat as they carried out their activities and they noticed improvements over time in what they could do around the house, for example.

"I like it as a social but gathering as well, it's really, it's good for your mental health"

"if you bend down to get something out of the bottom of the cupboard back up again, if you do this for a few weeks you notice the difference"

Participants felt it improved their physical health and mobility, but they could adapt what they were doing if they were struggling for any reasons. They thought the instructor was very good and encouraged them, while being extremely personable.

"My backs been bad like all week, so I had to stop a couple of times because it was pulling. But it doesn't matter, because you just do as much as you can"

"...so it's had like, a good impact on my physical health as well"

Some of the participants had been attending since the end of the Covid pandemic and they talked about noticing over time that the activity was making a difference to their mobility which helped them with their everyday practices.

Barriers to participation

Participants felt that the only barriers to getting involved was potentially their own motivation on the day. For example, if they were having a difficult time or they felt a lack of energy then attending the session could feel difficult. However, they strived to overcome this as they enjoyed the activity, the socialising and felt better at the end of the session. They also recognised that they were unlikely to undertake this type of exercise alone at home or would find it difficult to continue to do this on a regular basis. They recognised the benefits and hence were motivated to continue.

"Yeah, I think it makes you do it as well, having somewhere to come because with the best will in the world. I've said, Oh, I'm going to do it at home but I don't..."

but if you come here, everybody encourages everybody else"

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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-evaluation-overview/>

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