

Reading Ramblers, Chopwell Wood

- The Reading Ramblers group provides physical, mental and social wellbeing benefits to participants.
- Participation in the group is seen as a safe and inclusive way to access the forest and experience the associated benefits.

- This case study focuses on the 'Reading Ramblers' group at Chopwell Wood. The researchers joined them on their weekly audiobook walk through the forest on one occasion in March 2024.
- This case study is based on observations during the activity and conversations with participants and the activity leaders.
- We spoke to four women and one man. All participants were White and retired. Four participants were over 65, while one was between 35 and 65. None of the participants reported having a registered disability, though one did report having a long-term health condition that impacts their day-to-day activities.



The Reading Ramblers at Chopwell Wood

The Reading Ramblers is a group set up as part of the Active Forests programme in collaboration with the Gateshead libraries 'reading for wellbeing' scheme to improve the physical and mental wellbeing of local community members. The activity involves participants listening to an audiobook of choice from a selection of books, which are provided for free by the library, while walking through the forest together. The group are led around the forest by the Active Forests Coordinator (AFC) and library staff who are familiar with the woodland. The walk lasts approximately one hour. After their walk, the group convene in the forest classroom where they informally discuss the different books they are 'reading'. The group meet once a week in six-week blocks, three times a year. The majority of participants drive to the forest, but others who do not drive are picked up from home by one of the activity organisers. The walks tend to take place in all weather conditions and have only previously been cancelled in extreme circumstances.

Participants became aware of the activity through library advertisements, previous events the library had organised in the forest, through other reading groups or through word of mouth. Additionally, one participant got involved through the NHS social prescribing route.

Motivations

Participants identified different motivations for their involvement in the activity. For one participant, the motivation was simple, they wanted to join because it is a free activity that combines two of their hobbies – reading and walking. Participants also mentioned the social aspects of the activity as a motivation for participation. One participant joined the group through the NHS social prescribing route, after an extended period of social isolation. The activity was seen by the participant as a safe way to get out the house and interact with other people. Another participant mentioned that the group was a safe way to meet with people outdoors after self-isolating during the Covid-19 lockdown.

“You couldn’t interact with anyone, so when we started to come out of lockdown it was good to see people again...the things we did in the woods were really good because it was open air”

Participants additionally said that booking the activity in advance acts as a commitment to joining in and that knowing that others will be disappointed if you don’t attend motivated them to continue to participate.

Experiences of taking part in the forest

Participants agreed that the group is an extremely positive experience for them and particularly mentioned feeling more comfortable walking through the forest with the AFC who is there to lead the walk and prevent them getting lost or injuring themselves. Participants mentioned that this activity is not something they would do alone as they feel much more secure both walking through the forest and listening to the audiobook in a group. For this reason, the activity allows them to get into the outdoors.

“It’s a very safe way of doing it. I mean, I’m slow going down hills because I’m scared of falling down them, but you’ve got other people around, you’ve got a first aid kit. It’s a completely safe way of doing it. And I’m not sure how much I would tackle if I was on my own”

Participants also mentioned elements of the forest environment which contribute to their positive experiences. They particularly placed emphasis on enjoying noticing changes to the forest and the sensory elements of being out in the forest.

“I love the movement of the trees. Even though you're listening, it’s the movement, it’s the atmosphere. I like the smell as well, I like the smells. I think your senses pick up on different things”

Benefits of doing this activity

Participants were able to identify benefits of participation. Firstly, there were benefits to physical health. For one participant with a long-term health condition, the activity is an important because it helps them to ‘keep going’.

“Because I am so unfit, you wouldn’t believe, I find it helps to keep me walking, keep me going. Because I tire very, very quickly. I think because I’m diabetic, you just feel so tired, when you try and exercise. So I need something to keep me going”

Some participants also mentioned that they tend to view physical activity as being “boring” but felt that because of the audiobook element of this activity distracted them from viewing the activity this way and encouraged them to be active.

For others, there is a social benefit of being involved in the activity. Although participants individually listen to the audiobooks while walking, there is opportunity before and after the activity to interact with other participants and the activity organisers. Participants mentioned that they enjoy the company of others and that this in turn positively impacts their mental health.

“And yet the social side of it, and meeting lovely people, and being with people, in such a lovely environment, it really brings your anxiety levels down”

Activity levels after taking part

Throughout the focus group, there were indications that involvement has or will increase participant’s activity levels. For the participant who was involved through social prescribing, significant behaviour change has been witnessed, where the reading for wellbeing scheme (including the Reading Ramblers) triggered a transition from a period of not leaving the house at all, to now regularly taking part in different physical activities both through the weekly audiobook walks, but also through volunteer work that they are now confident enough to be involved in. One person also mentioned wanting to continue reading their book in their own time, which has subsequently led them to walk for longer outside of the weekly sessions.

“So if I’m really into the story, I think, “Well, I might as well- Rather than sitting here listening to it, I might as well just go for a walk.” So I’ve been at the coast and I think probably it does encourage me to walk a bit further, be out for a bit longer.”

Additionally, participants were enthusiastic about continuing with the Reading Ramblers group in future sessions, with one participant keen to attend to increase their fitness levels for an upcoming holiday which will involve lots of activity. Participants were also keen to try new activities within the forest, such as guided tree identification walks.

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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