

'Walking Talking Tuesdays', Sence Valley Forest Park

- Participants were primarily motivated to join the walking group for social reasons. Mental health benefits associated with being around others and being immersed in the forest environment were also identified.
- Participants viewed the activity as an inclusive way to stay physically active.
- Potential barriers to participation included lack of confidence, costs and awareness of the activity.

- This case study focuses on a walking group at Sence Valley Forest Park, a National Forest site in the Midlands. The researcher joined the group whilst they walked around the forest on one occasion in February 2025.
- This case study is based on observations made during the activity in addition to conversations with ten participants and one activity leader during an in-person focus group following the activity.
- We spoke to ten women and one man from Leicestershire, Derbyshire and Birmingham. Participants were between the ages of 45 and 74. All participants identified as White British. Three participants declared a health condition and two felt this condition impacted their day-to-day activities.



The 'Walking Talking Tuesdays' activity

Walking Talking Tuesdays is an activity facilitated by the not-for-profit organisation Peak Running and runs once every fortnight. During this 2-hour group activity, participants went on a walk through the forest together, led by the activity organiser. The activity is advertised as an opportunity to enjoy spending time outdoors, meet new people and engage in conversation. While many of the participants knew each other from previous sessions, some were meeting for the first time. The walk was approximately 5 miles long and included areas of established woodland, new planting and open fields. After the walk, participants gathered in an outdoor shelter for refreshments and eleven of the sixteen participants stayed for the focus group. The activity was free to attend, and participants did not have to pay for car parking.

Motivations

Several motivations for taking part in the activity were reported by participants. While they felt the activity provided an opportunity to get outside and into nature, to enjoy the nice weather and to take part in physical activity, the primary motivation across the group appeared to be social in nature. Participants viewed the activity as a way to meet new people, or as a chance to socialise with those they had already met at previous sessions.

"I mean, yeah, if we hadn't come, we wouldn't know half of these people."

While participants said they always enjoy the activity, they noted that it can sometimes be difficult to find the motivation to attend each session. One factor that they find helps with this is that attending the sessions requires participants to sign up in advance. They noted that this, alongside having support from others in the group, encourages them to join each time.

"I guess if you have made the arrangement to come, even if you're not feeling like it on that day, it does push you to do it"

Participants became aware of the activity via the organiser's website and through social media platforms, including Facebook, where it was advertised. The walk leader also contacts individuals prior to each session who she thinks may want to attend, but who may not have seen the advertisements online.

Benefits of doing this activity in the forest environment

Participants reported a number of benefits from taking part in the activity. These included mental health benefits, which they associated with walking. Participants noted that walking helps them to overcome personal struggles with mental health by allowing them to relax and forget about their worries.

"It is very good for the mental health...I had issues, a couple of years ago, and I walk anyway, and I have walked for years, but if it wasn't for this sort of going out walking, I wouldn't have come through it like I did."

These benefits were linked to being able to socialise with others in the group, but also through connecting to nature and being exposed to the sensory features of the forest environment. Participants specifically mentioned noticing blossom, having contact with different seasons, observing sunlight reach through the trees and hearing birdsong in the forest. For one participant, the activity is important not only for helping to treat mental health conditions, but also has a more preventative function, helping to build resilience against ill-health.

Changing or sustaining behaviours

The activity was also perceived as a benefit to participant's physical health. It was viewed as a simple way to take part in physical activity, while obtaining the co-benefits mentioned above. While the organisers also hold running events in the

forest, the regular walking sessions were viewed as a more inclusive way for those who are unable or less willing to run to keep physically active or to build up their physical activity levels, for example after a period of injury.

"There could be benefits for people that have injuries, or it could be someone that wouldn't bother running, but they're quite happy to go for a walk. So, the exercise is a big factor, that's a benefit of the walking club on Tuesdays"

Participants also highlighted the importance of the group nature of the activity, noting that being in the company of others and having an experienced group leader guide them through the forest helps create feelings of safety. They felt that they would be less confident and would feel more unsafe if they were to walk alone, demonstrating the benefit of regular group sessions.

Barriers to participation

While participants felt they did not personally face any barriers to participating in the activity, they acknowledged that there may be factors that could make attending the activity challenging for others. One participant noted the self-confidence needed to join a pre-existing group without the support of others. They felt that joining activities like the walking sessions are easier when you are able to attend with someone you already know.

"I think you've sometimes got to have the nerve to join a new group, as a solo person...You've got to be confident"

Additionally, participants noted that issues around resources may be problematic for some people wanting to take part in activities in forests. For example, while the car parking for this particular activity was free through the Feel Good in the Forest programme, they noted the high cost of parking at other local forests could be an issue. They also noted that having inappropriate footwear and clothing might prevent people from joining.

Some participants further felt that levels of local awareness of the activity may be an issue, as it can be difficult to find out about the sessions if you do not already know about the organisation. They noted a need to advertise such activities further, suggesting locations such as doctors' surgeries and libraries as examples of places where the activity could be further promoted.

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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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