

Added value of the Active Forests Programme

Active Forests has generated a range of benefits that extend far beyond the programme's core aim of creating a physical activity habit for life for visitors to the nation's forests. Researchers at Forest Research conducted 40-minute telephone interviews with three staff members about these sources of added value in August 2025. Interviewees held senior management positions in Forestry England's Recreation, Commercial Visitor Development and Access for All teams. The interview data was analysed thematically, and the results summarised below.

A multi-faceted evidence base and network of demonstration sites

Active Forests has produced an extensive evidence bank since it was created in 2014 in a partnership between Forestry England and Sport England. The evidence comes from data Forestry England collect and the monitoring and evaluation of the programme by Forest Research. Both organisations have worked closely together to produce this evidence base. This is then regularly used for promoting and communicating Forestry England's work to funders, partners, collaborators and other stakeholders.

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... I try and provide evidence to say, "Look ... what good work we're doing now, which we could do more of, if you give us more money."

The evidence is disseminated via a dashboard of quantitative data internally, the Forest Research website and a Teams folder of qualitative case studies from Forest Research and Forestry England. Interviewees described how quantitative and qualitative data sources complement each other, with one providing 'hard' evidence of financial and tangible values of the work, whilst the other was useful for winning hearts as well as minds, particularly in face-to-face contexts.

... The fast facts and figures ... put ... financial values on that people really want. And then I illustrate that by doing the storytelling.

The evidence also helps to demonstrate broader systems change, beyond the direct benefits to people, for example NHS cost savings. An example of how the evidence was used for advocacy work was a digital slide/printed card titled “Forests Saves Lives”, with an image of a hospital bed in a forest and metrics about public health benefits. Interviewees gave the cards to government ministers and influencers at meetings. They do not always know which piece of evidence will strike a chord, so having a range of data sources is particularly valuable, as illustrated by a meeting with the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Nature:

...The thing that really connected Minister Creagh was when I said we are the largest provider of park runs in the country ... That was the thing that stuck... you never quite know what is the thing that's going to get the people's interest.

Interviewees also rely on Active Forests sites to showcase Forestry England’s work to potential partners or collaborators.

... There's something about seeing the forest... seeing other people using the space for the different things that they're doing... the facilities and the experience...

Whenever... one of the commissioners ... want to show off what we do for people, then they go to Active Forests sites... particularly the social prescribing locations ... those where the stories... can be really brought to life.

... Mak[ing] a connection with a new partner... political or commercial partner or any other stakeholders, we always ... try and do that in situ if we can...seeing is believing... I'll be talking about diverse communities that we connect with, and we will be standing in a forest. And it so often will look like we've choreographed it, because there'll be a group of school children or ... people using wheelchairs or ... a faith group and we haven't choreographed it... This is just happening.

Active Forests also provided a training opportunity that allowed Forestry England to cascade learning to external organisations, for example, through social prescribing awareness days for health professionals:

You're hitting people that then will go out and, in their practice, or with other people, will reach out to more.

A partnership with Sport England that has benefited both parties

Interviewees described how Sport England use the Active Forests evidence both internally and more broadly to advocate for physical activity in forests:

The dashboard is the most comprehensive data suite that they use for our sector. We're still way ahead of any other organisation that they fund.

They really value what we can provide, and they use it a lot.

This evidence was used internally (e.g. to inform the 10-year strategy) and within the Department of Culture and Media Studies, where Sport England is based. Sport England also use the findings for advocacy and awareness raising work, across a substantial network of organisations that they influence. The network includes national governing bodies part-funded by Sport England (e.g. British Cycling, British England Athletics), as well as organisations in the active travel and environmental sectors (e.g. NHS, Active Travel England, YHA, Ordnance Survey, Natural England).

The evidence provides the accountability that Sport England need for this advocacy work and facilitates communication across different organisations and cultures:

Unpacking it for people ... speak[ing] across so many different boundaries.

Sport England's efforts complemented Forestry England's own advocacy and awareness raising work, due to the different networks and zones of influence:

They have...a really big reach. We do too, but they... reach into different areas. So ... if they're taking what we're doing back out to their stakeholders and partners, it's only going to amplify what we're doing.

Interviewees also felt that Active Forests has fuelled the development of an enviable, unique and powerful relationship between Forestry England and Sport England. This has developed because of the shared ambitions, with the longevity of key staff members also acting as a contributing factor. An example of shared ambitions was provided by the government's New Towns strategy, which revealed overlaps and synergies between Forestry England's woodland creation programme and Sport England's active travel and environment plans.

...The depth of the relationship has grown... we can talk about policies and wider sector policies and how we can influence together and ... provide evidence.

There is a regular process of two-way knowledge exchange between organisations, with Forestry England benefitting from Sport England's health and sport research and maps. Finally, interviewees explained how the discourse with Sport England yields fresh insights and perspectives on strategic and operational issues.

They're a good critical friend... the evaluation processes and the...insight that comes from that is very useful. They are ... able to sort of play back to us... for example... we reach more women than is the benchmark... for the sector... we wouldn't know that if we didn't have that sort of...other perspective.

Broadening Forestry England's visitor base and promoting inclusion

Active Forests attracts new visitors by providing a supportive group environment:

... If it's something that's pitched at beginners, ... everybody feels they're in the same boat.

... People who would feel more comfortable ... than just going and doing a run themselves.

... I would be more inclined to go and do a cycle ride ... if it was ... with other women and someone's going to ... guide me through.

Active Forests' expertise in supported engagement has led to joint working with Forestry England's 'Access for All' programme, which has been beneficial for both teams. Access for All builds the physical infrastructure for improving access at forests, whilst Active Forests promotes the new facilities to potential users (individuals, groups or external providers) and monitors use levels. The collaboration between Active Forests and Access for All has in turn helped to seed the initiative 'Know Before You Go', which provides accessibility information for people with additional needs to plan their visit, featuring, for example, location maps of inclusive play equipment, easy access trails and mobility scooter hire.

... [A] really important precursor to anyone's visit is them being able to know what they need to know before they ever make the decision to go.

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A programme with a range of internal benefits for Forestry England

Active Forests has brought new talent into Forestry England, influenced policy and practice within the organisation and increased revenue. The recruitment for Active Forests Coordinators attracts candidates with novel skills or backgrounds, permanently diversifying Forestry England's talent pool:

... It brought in different skill sets ... some of them have sports psychology, ... some ... worked in the sports industry, in marketing roles or in other ways... people who weren't the more traditional, let's say, countryside management... that's changed our recreational staff cohort.

... We've got quite a few who have been promoted into ... forest centre managers or area managers ... then brought the skills and learning from ... the Active Forests programme into wider recreation topics.

The experience of delivering the Active Forests programme had also enriched existing skillsets and led to improvements in organisational practices, including car park management and audience development. If an Active Forest Coordinator notices that a group of visitors are experiencing a particular issue, for example, then that learning will be shared across area staff teams.

... A lot of this has really upped our game as a recreation provider. It's driven a significant improvement in terms of our overall... product development... having these social objectives.

... How are we going to organise the car park better... all of that kind of stuff is now in the mainstream of the organisation.

The Active Forests programme had also transformed how Forestry England pilot and scale up novel activities or facilities. It enables forests to try out novel interventions and assess their success, before deciding whether to make them permanent:

... We would kind of learn things through piloting and then we would roll it out more broadly. So, there's like a whole methodology of way of working that we've honed in Active Forest ... it makes complete sense to work like that on other things.

... A lot of the well-being trails [are] ... temporary signage. ... then we go back, and we look at them and put permanent signage ... if it's something we want to keep.

Active Forests had improved the profile of recreation within the organisation and informed organisational policy, for example the Forestry Commission's five-year strategy. The evidence also features in Forestry England's annual reports and Natural Capital Accounts, which quantify the benefits and assesses the extent and quality of landscapes they manage. Interviewees also felt that the programme contributes to staff morale and team spirit:

You know you can tell when you turn up at site and there's an Active Forest coordinator there and they're doing something amazing, that everybody's super proud of that.

... It's the establishment of a movement that unites our staff, volunteers, visitors, communities, organisations and stakeholders in a shared mission to inspire.

Active Forests also represents an important source of revenue, with the increase in visitor footfall contributing to income derived from car parking, café use, equipment hire and membership sales.

... It's been important financially... we are the largest provider of parkrun opportunities... if you think what that does in terms of bringing in car parking income on a Saturday morning.

Corporate partners and sponsors were also becoming an increasingly important source of income:

... We had this aspiration to get some of the funding from corporate partnerships... it's not huge ... but it's an important part of the mix and we'd like to see it grow...

In conclusion, the added value from Active Forests falls into four categories. First, it has produced an extensive evidence base and network of demonstration sites for showcasing Forestry England's work and demonstrating systems change. Second, the project has led to a strong long-term relationship with Sport England, with complementary expertise and knowledge exchange that supports advocacy and awareness raising work. Third, the programme has broadened Forestry England's visitor base and informed its efforts to promote inclusion. Finally, the experience of delivering Active Forests has improved internal organisational practices, as well as attracting staff with new skills and generating new sources of revenue.

This research is funded by Sport England and Forestry England.

More information about the monitoring and evaluation of the Active Forests programme <https://www.forestresearch.gov.uk/research/active-forests-evaluation-overview/>. For further information contact Liz O'Brien: liz.obrien@forestresearch.gov.uk