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Research Note

Removing barriers to being physically active in forests: Phase 3 of the Active Forests Programme

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The Active Forests Programme was established in 2014 and is a national partnership between Forestry England and Sport England. It supports and encourages people to live more physically active lives through visiting and connecting with the nation's forests, which are managed by Forestry England. This Research Note presents findings from Phase 3 of the programme, which ran for three years from 2023 to 2026. It aimed to remove barriers to being physically active in a forest environment by 1) creating accessible and inclusive environments, 2) maintaining, growing, and diversifying the opportunities available across the nation's forests, and 3) delivering health and wellbeing benefits, and tackling health inequalities. Forestry England and Sport England, with support from National Lottery Funding, combine their resources to fund and host the programme. Activities (regular) and events (one off) in the forests are delivered by a network of providers that are coordinated by Forestry England's Active Forests Coordinators (AFC) at each site. Forestry England also provide infrastructure and interpretation to facilitate self-led activities on a variety of trails (existing and new).

The Active Forests Programme

The Active Forests Programme (AFP) plays an important role in helping Forestry England achieve its purpose, delivering on its commitments in the 'Growing the Future 2021–26' strategy (Forestry England, 2021) and helping Sport England to achieve the objectives set out in its 'Uniting the Movement – Implementation Plan' (Sport England, 2021). The AFP took place at 35 sites in Phase 3, however ten of those were only involved for one year and therefore Active Forest (AF) activities were more limited at those sites. A diverse and innovative range of activities were provided as part of the overall programme, including running, walking, cycling trails, events and led activities, bat/racket and ball sports, fitness, orienteering, core strength activities, multi-events, and wellbeing trails.

Box 1 Key outcomes of the Active Forests Programme Phase Three

Connecting people with forests*
12.3 million visits in three years
52% from target groups
Most popular activities: walking, cycling, running

Cost savings for health*
£125 million: Quality Adjusted Life Year savings
£4.9 million: mental health value of visits

Key benefits**
94% fun and enjoyment
93% mental wellbeing
91% escape and freedom
91% physical activity wellbeing

Physical activity**
60% already active
40% not active enough to benefit health
48% aim to be more active

Reaching key audiences**
63% women
12% ethnic minorities
15% from Index of multiple deprivation deciles 1–3
25% with a long-term illness

Feel Good in the Forest (FGITF)***
1 674 698 visits
13 882 social prescribing visits
Four main FGITF sites
35 mini FGITF projects at 17 sites

Wellbeing trails***
1 200 748 visits
22 sites with wellbeing trails

* Taken from operational throughput data
** Data taken from participant survey
*** FGITF and wellbeing trail visits are included in the 12.3 total visits

Introduction to Phase 3

Forestry England had the following key performance indicators for Phase 3 that were relevant to this evaluation:

- 536 000 visitors from specifically identified Equality, Diversity, and Inclusive audiences
- 3 million physically active visits, supporting people's health and wellbeing

Key elements of the programme in Phase 3 included:

Core programme: where most of the programme is delivered on the largest number of sites. It includes the development and testing of new activities to attract a broad and diverse audience. For example, disc golf was introduced in this phase of the programme, parkrun and running trails have been scaled up to more sites, and 'This Woman Runs' introduced.

Feel Good in the Forest (FGITF): includes the green social prescribing component of the AFP which connects people to non-medical support for their health and wellbeing. Four forests – Chopwell Wood, the National Forest (Hicks Lodge and Sence Valley), Guisborough Forest, and Thames Chase Community Forest delivered this part of the programme. There were also 35 mini FGITF projects that took place on 17 sites. Training events were also run for health professionals.

Inclusive Forests: focused on undertaking access audits, running community focus groups to understand barriers to accessing woodlands, and improving infrastructure on seven priority sites to support people's use of forests. Changes included improving paths, installing benches, providing accessible parking bays, and updating toilet facilities.

Wellbeing trails: trails with themed signage were developed, inviting people to pause, take notice, and connect with the forest environment through a mindfulness and restorative-focused approach.

The target audiences were women and girls, minority ethnic groups, younger adults (under 35), older adults (over 65), those with an impairment or long-term health condition, those facing prejudice and discrimination, and lower socio-economic groups. Each forest site via the AFC specified its target audience(s) from this list based on the types of visitors accessing the forests and the demographics and needs of its surrounding communities.

To find out more about all phases of the AF programme to date, visit the project page and see also O'Brien (2019), O'Brien and Forster (2021), and O'Brien *et al.* (2026).

Methods

A mixed methodology was employed to monitor and evaluate the programme over Phase 3, which combined quantitative and qualitative data gathering.

Quantitative data was predominantly collected via two main data streams:

1. Operational throughput data: breakdowns provided by AFCs on quarterly visits by activity and number of visits, with details provided for specific dates and providers of activities. This also includes trail people counter data.

2. Participant survey data (n=10 181 from 20 sites that provided data): short survey collected via tablets on-site by AFCs/ volunteers and online via the Forestry England website. It provides details on activities undertaken, physical activity level, key benefits, and demographics.

Qualitative data was collected from 78 participants who were involved in a range of AF activities (Table 1). To collect data, the researchers joined the activity and undertook observations of how the activity worked and the dynamics of the group. A focus group was held with participants afterwards.

Data analysis

A variety of descriptive and inferential statistical techniques are used for the operational throughput and participant survey data. This provides insight into the AFP as well as descriptive statistics that can be filtered and aggregated via data tables in the AFP dashboard, which is provided to Forestry England and Sport England on a quarterly basis. Quality Adjusted Life Year calculations follow the methodology of Moseley *et al*. (2018), where numbers of people were estimated using frequency of visits associated with the main activities in the participant survey. All statistical analysis was conducted in R.

The visit numbers include data from people counters on different trails in several forests. Historically an adjustment has been made to ensure that when new counters come on stream, they do not over inflate the number of visits, i.e. there is a cap calculation. In AF3 this approach was applied to the first year of data from the people counters, however it was not applied to the two subsequent years. This is due to the activities available at forest sites increasing and AF becoming a larger part of the physical activity offer happening at the forest sites. This means that the original cap could have potentially underestimated visit numbers. A new methodology is being developed for AF4.

Focus group discussions were recorded verbatim with verbal consent given by the participants and detailed notes taken by re-listening to the recordings. Analysis was thematic and iterative; we followed Ahmed *et al*'s. (2025) general approach of data familiarisation, coding the notes and developing and reviewing themes. From this approach, we identified key themes related to motivations and benefits of being active in the forest environment, as well as aspects of the woodland environment that participants noted were important to them, and any behaviour change that participants described.

Results

There was a total estimate of £125 million* QALY (Quality Adjusted Life Year) cost savings over the three years based on main type of physical activity, duration of activity, and frequency of activity.

Mental health value of visits to the forest sites were valued at over £4.9 million based on avoided costs due to reduced incidences of depression and anxiety.

*The number of people were estimated from visits, therefore these numbers are experimental statistics as the method to identify unique individuals has not yet been fully published.

For the QALY estimate we used the energy expenditure of forest based physical activities, along with duration and frequency of those activities for each forest, and then estimated the cost saving over the life of Phase 3. We followed the approach of Moseley *et al*. (2018), where 30 minutes of moderate intensity physical activity undertaken each week over one year results in an additional 0.010677 QALY per individual. QALYs are used to evaluate health outcomes by bringing together the quality and quantity of life lived.

For mental health value we followed the methodology of Saraev *et al*. (2022), which outlined a per visit mental health value of £0.39, which has been adjusted for inflation to £0.41 per visit.

The Office for National Statistics four personal wellbeing questions show some small differences between the AFP participants and the national population (Figure 1). We looked at whether being active, fairly active, or inactive might impact wellbeing. The figure shows that those who are active or fairly active score better for happiness, life being worthwhile, and life satisfaction, while those who are inactive score slightly worse. Those who were inactive or fairly active were slightly more anxious than the national population figures for England. This could be because the AFP is reaching its target groups, who may be generally more anxious. The anxiety levels of this group may be reduced with support from the AFP to become (and remain) more physically active.

Table 1 Focus group qualitative case studies

Forest site	Activity name	No. of women	No. of men
Core programme focus groups			
Salcey Forest	This Woman Runs	9	0
Hamsterley Forest	Wellbeing walks	10	3
Sherwood Pines Forest	Walk and talk 999	0	6
Alice Holt Forest	Disc Golf	0	3
Feel Good in the Forest focus groups			
Chopwell Wood	Reading ramblers	4	1
Guisborough Forest	Nature journalling	5	2
Sence Valley Forest Park	Walking, talking Tuesday	10	1
Hicks Lodge	Stroll and stretch	5	1
Chopwell Wood	Woodland warblers	5	1
Guisborough Forest	Green health routes	6	1
Interviews			
Forestry England senior staff – focusing on the added value of the AF programme		3	0
NHS staff after an NHS 'enhance' training day at Thetford Forest – benefits of forest activities for staff and patients		1	1
Total		**58**	**20**

The survey asked participants whether they gained four wellbeing benefits from undertaking physical activity in the forest. These were the key benefits identified in Active Forests Phase 2 (O'Brien *et al.* 2026). Those agreeing that they gained these benefits and/or very definitely gained them are as follows:

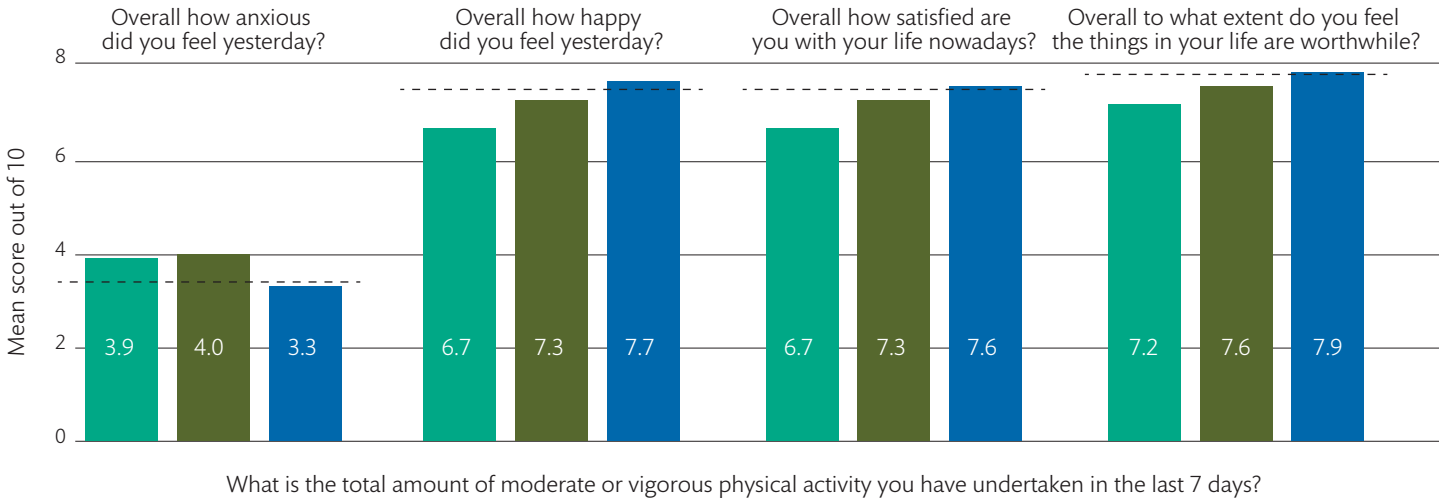
- 94% sense of fun and enjoyment
- 93% mental wellbeing benefits
- 91% a feeling of escape and freedom
- 91% physical wellbeing benefits

Number of visits and popular activities

The total number of visits were over 12.3 million.

The three most popular activities were walking (43% of visits), cycling (35%), and running (11%). Table 2 shows the broad activities available as part of the programme, but this hides the range of activity within each of these categories. For example, the running category was made up of people running on specific trails, those participating in parkrun or junior parkrun, people joining running events, running groups, and CaniCross – which is people running with their dog.

Figure 1 Office for National Statistics four personal wellbeing questions: comparing England and AF scores (data from the participant survey differentiated by level of physical activity in the past week). The dotted line shows the scores for the England population.



Key

- Inactive (less than 30 minutes)
- Fairly active (30 minutes – 149 minutes)
- Active (2.5 hours or more)

Table 2 Number of visits over the three years associated with broad AFP activities (taken from the operational throughput data). See caveat concerning people counters outlined in the methods section.

Broad activity	2023/24	2024/25	2025/26	Total
Ball sports	12318	554	-	12872
Bat/racket sports	8625	29404	37179	75208
Core/Strength	3092	3825	3694	10611
Cycling	411891	1795375	2107172	4314438
Fitness	791	1485	2492	4768
Inclusive infrastructure	743	714054	15611	730408
Miscellaneous	29418	50856	74862	155136
Multi-event	1001	1159	1210	3370
Orienteering	39554	20063	19583	79200
Other	80226	48906	32410	161542
Running	437756	366073	508447	1312276
Shooting sport	18023	20663	13384	52070
Walking	437848	2300924	2518560	5257332
Wellbeing and nature	5579	86012	88395	179986
Totals	**1486865**	**5439353**	**5422999**	**12349217**

Physical activity

The AFP aimed to reach those who are not active enough to improve their health (i.e. those doing less than 150 minutes of exercise per week) and the data shows it is doing this. Table 3 shows that the AFP reached more fairly active people when compared to the Active Lives England survey of the general population, but fewer inactive people.

In total, 48% of participants aimed to become more active. 25% of those who were inactive, 62% who were fairly active, and 50% who were active aimed to become more active within the next month, showing a positive mindset to increase activity levels.

The qualitative case studies for the core programme are outlined in Table 1. The key physical health benefits identified included getting fitter, maintaining fitness, and losing weight. The mental health benefits included escaping the burdens and fast pace of everyday life, having an opportunity for reflection, opening up, and facing no pressure in their activity.

> *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*
> Walk and talk 999, Sherwood Pines Forest

> *It's like group therapy... gets rid of stress hormones. I have quite a stressful life, because I've got a little boy who's disabled, ...[this] keeps me sane.*
> This Woman Runs, Salcey Forest

The social aspects were also identified as important as an opportunity to chat and exchange interests and experiences.

> *it's certainly the nicest social group I've ever been in [...] You feel supported and that's rare.*
> Wellbeing walk, Hamsterley Forest

Other important benefits gained included developing new skills (e.g. disc golf), being supported by activity leaders and participants (e.g. Wellbeing walks and Walk and talk 999), and connecting to and being in an attractive forest environment (all groups).

Feel Good in the Forest

48% stated that they aimed to become more active

40% of people in the programme were inactive or fairly active

There were 1 674 698 visits to the four main FGITF sites of Chopwell Wood, Guisborough Forest, the National Forest (Hicks Lodge and Sence Valley), and Thames Chase Community Forest. 13 882 were specifically linked to green social prescribing activities. A range of innovative led and supported activities were provided, such as Reading Ramblers, Woodland Warblers (singing group), and nature journalling.

The case studies for FGITF are outlined in Table 1. Physical activity was seen as an important benefit, with activity leaders using their skills to adapt to the needs of participants.

> *...I had a moderate stroke a few years ago, so this is great for me. I was advised by the doctors [to attend].*
> Gentle exercise, Chopwell Wood

Feeling safe and comfortable with the activity were also critical for some:

> *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.*
> Reading Ramblers, Chopwell Wood

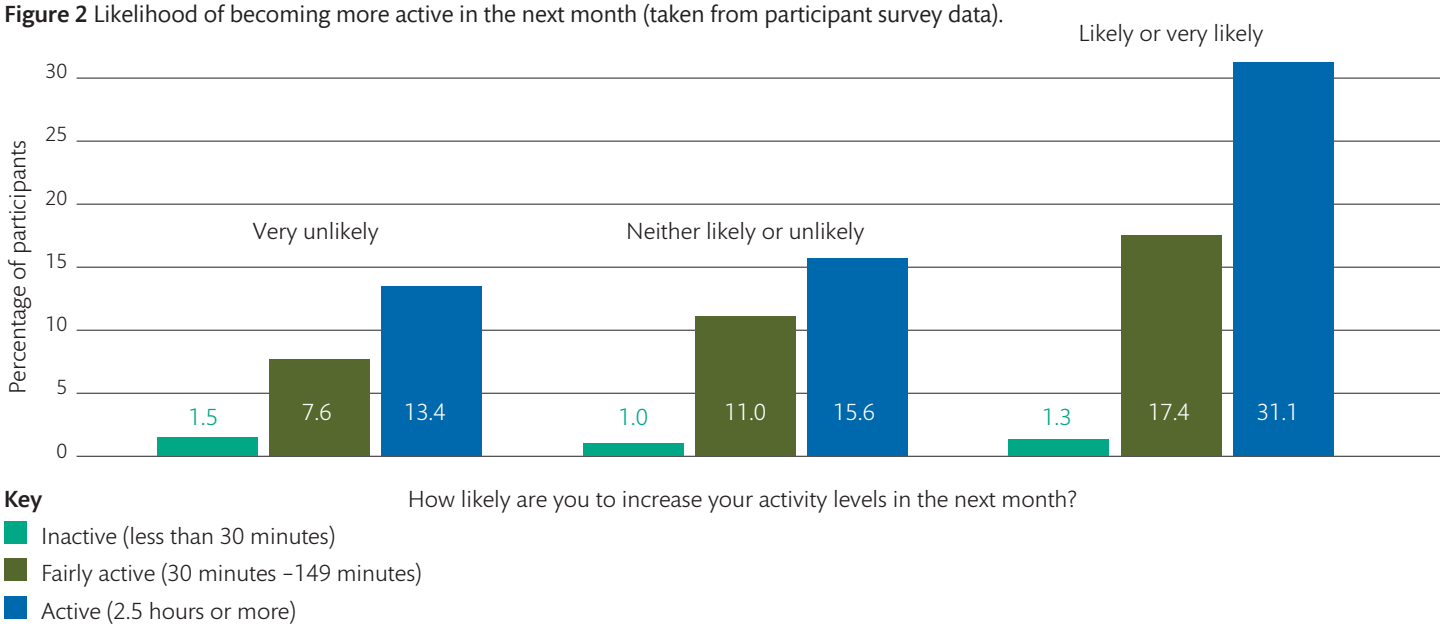
Mental wellbeing benefits were very important, with participants talking about feeling relaxed, calmer, and uplifted from participating in the activities. Socialising, particularly for those who had become socially isolated after Covid-19, was also very beneficial, as was being led and supported at the activities.

Having a purpose, getting out when the weather is not so great. You know, because you're thinking, I know it will be alright, because [the leader] will be there and everybody else will be there, and it will be nice to catch up. Stroll and Stretch, National Forest

Table 3 The percentage of participants who were active (150 mins of physical activity per week), inactive (less than 30 mins per week) or fairly active (30–149 mins per week) compared to the Sport England Active Lives Survey (Sport England 2026). Taken from the participant survey data.

	Active Forests Programme	Active Lives Survey (Sport England)
Inactive (less than 30 mins a week)	4%	24.7%
Fairly active (30–149 mins a week)	36%	10.7%
Active (150 mins a week)	60%	64.6%

Figure 2 Likelihood of becoming more active in the next month (taken from participant survey data).



Participants overall talked about the positive experiences they had, and the atmosphere and joy of being in the forest environment. In particular they enjoyed: seeing wildlife, the trees and their smells, the fresh air, and the changing seasons. There were also behaviour changes noted, with some participants stating that they were socialising more, walking further, stretching at home, trying new activities in the forest, and visiting the forest at different times from their FGITF activity.

A This Woman Runs group.



Wellbeing trails

There were an estimated 1 200 748* visits associated with wellbeing trails installed at 22 sites (this includes trail, counter, group, and journal data).

*Not all of the forests with a wellbeing trail included a counter to capture visits, which may have led to under-reporting, however not all those using the trail were using it as a wellbeing trail and therefore some over-reporting may have occurred. This is why this figure is an estimate.

Wellbeing trails were created and panels designed with the aim of supporting self-led engagement with the restorative benefits of the forest sites. These accessible trails supported visitor wellbeing by providing opportunities for people to be active while connecting to nature.

Target groups

52% of visits were from target groups.

Target groups included those from ethnic minority groups, lower socio-economic groups, those with a long-term illness, those who describe their gender as other than male or female, people from a diversity of religious backgrounds, and those under 35 and over 65. Table 4 shows that the AFP is reaching a higher percentage of women than men. The programme is reaching a good proportion of people who are not yet active enough to improve their health, and the programme aims to support their aspirations to become more active. The participant survey responses show that the four Feel Good in the Forest sites are reaching more older, inactive people, those from lower IMD deciles, and those with a long-term illness compared with the other sites.

A Reading Ramblers group.



Other aspects of the programme

Feel Good in the Forest health professional training

Forestry England delivered 32 training days for healthcare professionals, engaging 941 participants in person or online. The training supported them in gaining knowledge, confidence, and the first-hand experience needed to refer patients to forest activities. Two NHS employees involved in planning and delivering a training day with Forestry England AF staff at Thetford Forest were interviewed. About 30 were involved in the day and feedback outlined their positive experiences and reduction in stress from being in the forest. It also gave professionals an opportunity to experience some of the forest activities that could be prescribed to their patients and allowed them to understand the potential of encouraging patients to increase their physical activity in an attractive forest environment.

> *A lot of the population, they don't necessarily have a medical need. They have a need for belonging and for being social or for being active. And none of that needs a doctor; nature-based activities get people out, it makes people healthier, reduces the NHS's burden.*
> NHS professional delivering training day at Thetford Forest

Added value of the Active Forests Programme

Interviews with three senior Forestry England staff explored the benefits and added value of the AFP beyond its core aims of creating a physical activity habit for life. It has benefited Forestry England in several ways:

- The evidence base, built on since the programme began in 2014, enables Forestry England to promote and communicate the work to other partners, funders, and collaborators.
- The partnership with Sport England provides benefits to both organisations as they have different networks and zones of influence. This can provide fresh insights and perspectives on strategic and operational issues.
- The AFP has broadened Forestry England's visitor base and promoted inclusive use via joint working with Forestry England's 'Access for all' programme. The AFP also helped seed the 'Know before you go' initiative, which focuses on providing accessible information for people with additional needs to plan their forest visit.
- The programme has attracted staff with new skills and generated new sources of revenue.

Conclusion

The ongoing data and feedback captured throughout Phase 3 of the Active Forests Programme shows how embedded it has become for both Forestry England and Sport England. These organisations have co-developed each phase of the programme while strengthening their partnership. Through each phase, the organisations have reflected and learned from the data and practice on the ground to improve the programme. The AFP is multi-faceted, combining strong partnership governance, an innovative offer of different activities to suit many needs, attractive forest environments, and effective marketing and communications to encourage participation. Though this evaluation focused mainly on the Core Programme and Feel Good in the Forest, all four aspects of the programme worked together and supported the focus of removing barriers to being active in forest environments. Inclusive Forests tests ways to provide infrastructure that supports use by other parts of the programme, and the wellbeing trails provide new opportunities for those involved in the core programme and FGITF to access the trails on their own, outside of the led activities and events they engage with.

A wide range of activities and opportunities are provided to suit people with different needs and abilities. This is a key strength of the overall programme and critical in removing barriers to being physically active in a forest environment. AFCs, in interactions with organisations and activity providers in the local areas surrounding their woodlands, were able to develop and organise innovative approaches to being physically active in the forests by introducing activities such as reading rambling, disc golf, pedal and play, photography, nature journalling, and singing. They were able to target specific groups that need support, such as those involved in the emergency services; those with poor mobility; those with conditions such as stroke and diabetes; and the socially isolated, inactive, and fairly active. These have resulted in enjoyable experiences, meaningful activities, social connections, and connections to attractive forests for participants. Through these approaches, the programme has removed barriers for many people to being physically active in a forest environment.

Table 4 The percentage of people getting involved in Active Forests by target group (using participant survey data). It shows the findings from all those who responded to the participant survey and then separates out the four Feel Good in the Forests respondents from those visiting non-FGITF sites. Numbers shown are percentages.

Respondents	Women	Men	65+	Under 35	Inactive / Fairly active	Ethnic minority	Index of multiple deprivation deciles 1-3	Long-term limiting illness
All participant survey sample	63	34	12	19	40	12	15	25
Four Feel Good in the Forest sites	63	33	20	15	45	14	19	29
Non-Feel Good in the Forest sites	61	34	10	19	39	11	14	24

Note: The data in the table is taken from the Participant survey; it is only representative of total visits in terms of the main activities people enjoy (i.e. walking, cycling, running). We do not know the demographic data for all visits.

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