

Priory Wood & Forge Mill Lake

Health Woodland Improvement Grant Success Story



Priory Wood and Forge Mill Lake are an impressive example of the improvements that can be made as a result of the Health Woodland Improvement Grant. Based in the heart of Birmingham, where social deprivation raises issues of poor health, social exclusion and lack of access to green space, Priory Wood and Forge Mill lake offer easy and desirable access to green space. This project has enabled and encouraged a vast and diverse range of local people to improve their health and wellbeing through walking programmes and social interaction initiatives. Priory Wood and Forge Mill Lake can now offer leisurely and scenic walks for all.

objectives

- To encourage exiting woodland owners to link with new and established groups of users and benefit from their experience.
- To increase awareness of local woodlands for recreation and to provide opportunities for local communities to improve their health in a natural setting.
- To improve access around Priory Woods Local Nature Reserve, which forms part of the Black Country Urban Forest.

actions

- Major footpath improvements through resurfacing.
- Drainage improvements.
- Erection of waymarker posts as a result of Sandwell PCT funding.
- Improvement of an existing health walk around Priory Wood and Forge Mill Lake .
- Affectometer surveys with walks
- Conservation activities with volunteers to maintain footpaths and habitats.
- Generation of interest through adding the new walk to a tri-annual publication by Sandwell Stride, which involves the distribution of 9,000 programmes to local leisure centres, GP practices, libraries etc.
- Further use of the site through advertising of educational initiatives, e.g. the Heron Trail.

achievements

- Huge infrastructure improvements. The site was inaccessible and undesirable prior to HWIG funding, but is now highly popular within the community. A well maintained trail is clearly visible from the car park, thus encouraging the estimated 500,000 visitors per year to explore.
- A weekly walk occurs around Priory Woods, with participation averaging at 25 people. Previously, numbers averaged at 10-15 people. Of the three walks offered, Priory Woods is by far the most popular.
- The weekly walkers benefit not just from the physical activity but from high levels of social interaction, as teas and coffees are usually enjoyed after each walk.
- The site is well used for educational visits and initiatives. For example, the Heron Trail.
- Independent groups lead their own walks around the site. For example, the local YMCA run a weekly walk which attracts 15-30 people regularly, and a local Sikh group lead a twice-weekly walk.

background

- The *Choosing Health* White Paper (DH, 2004) outlines a new approach to public health, with a focus on tackling health inequalities amongst those with poorer physical and mental health, usually at the lower end of the social scale.
- *Health and Well-being: Trees, Woodlands and Natural Spaces* (P Tabbush and L O'Brien, 2002) and *Trees and Woodlands: Nature's Health Service* (L O'Brien, 2005) show the positive impact forests have on health and well-being.
- Sandwell Valley falls within the Black Country Urban Forest, which aims to raise the profile of woodlands in close proximity to urban areas and ensure all people are able to gain access. It is considered the 'green lung' of the conurbation.
- Sandwell is one of the most deprived boroughs in the country and is densely and diversely populated.
- The condition of Priory Wood and Forge Mill lake as an area for walking was considered a barrier to access. Unsuited footpath conditions and poor access acts as a deterrent to many potential health walkers, particularly those not confident in the countryside.
- Groups that would benefit from the improved access had been previously identified, including those with learning difficulties, men over 50 at High Risk of Coronary Heart Disease and local Primary School children.

quotes

Jo Miskin, Sandwell MBC, says:

"Funding from the Forestry Commission had a significant impact at Priory Wood. The state of site beforehand was awful, the entrance was so off-putting. Now, anyone who parks in the car park can see immediately there is an easily accessible, desirable wood to explore."

partners

- Forestry Commission: £20,000
- Sandwell MBC: £34,930
- Royal Society for the Protection of Birds
- Sandwell Stride: £500
- Volunteers: £3,900
- Environment Agency: £6,500

lessons learnt

- A strong partnership with the local Primary Care Trust increases the sustainability of WHI initiatives, as does the use of in-house staff at the MBC as walk leaders.
- Targeting a broad and diverse range of people in the local area can be difficult; the right local organisations need to be contacted and involved in the process.