

M&E of the 3 year Active Forest programme pilot

Fun and Fitness in the Forest

Introduction

The United Kingdom is facing unprecedented public-health challenges as a result of physical inactivity, sedentary behaviour and obesity. Part of the solution to these challenges is to create easily accessible opportunities that enable people to sustain or increase their physical-activity. The Active Forest programme is one such approach.

Forestry Commission England (FCE) and Sport England (SE), in partnership, co-created the Active Forest (AF) pilot programme with the aim of encouraging physical activity and creating a sporting habit for life for visitors to the Public Forest Estate in England.

Five sites were chosen to run the pilot programme and an Active Forest Coordinator (AFC) was employed at each site to develop and promote physical activities.

A wide range of core activities such as running and cycling were developed along with a variety of events and new 'play on the day' activities that had not previously been trialled by FCE such as table tennis, volleyball, Gruffalo orienteering and football.

Monitoring and evaluation were critical elements of the programme and were embedded into it from the beginning. The partnership working between FCE and SE engendered a willingness to discuss methods, change approach, trial new methods and learn and adapt as the programme progressed. The first year of data gathering acted as a baseline before the AFCs were recruited and in post. Cannock Chase Forest importantly acted as a comparison site, as it did not have an AFC.

Objectives of the Active Forest programme

Sport England objectives	Forestry Commission England objectives
Generate 500,000 sporting visits	Inspire people to participate in enjoyable and high-quality sporting experiences on the Public Forest Estate and keep them participating regularly
Enable people to move to regular sports activity (i.e. once a week)	Focus on existing and new visitors to the public forest, targeting those who are less active
Reach out to those that are new to sport (i.e. have not participated in sport in the previous six months)	Provide robust evidence to demonstrate effectiveness, learn lessons, confirm that the measurable participation outputs have been achieved
Involve the 14–25-year age group	
Test SE's ability to work with a new sector (outdoor), and explore issues of sustainability and scalability in new outdoor programmes	Ensure longevity beyond the funding period, by developing strong relationships with the aim of working with others to deliver activities in the forest in the longer term

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Top 10 key results

1. There were a total of **700,097¹ sporting visits** over the three-year pilot, with a 246% increase in the number of visits in the third year versus the first (baseline) year of the programme. The AF sites showed an accelerating upward trend in the number of visits through time.
2. Less active individuals (sporting activity once a month or less²) made up 15% of the matched survey data³. There was a highly **significant increase in sporting activity** between completing the participant survey and the follow-on survey ($p < 0.001$) in these individuals, with 49% of people moving to being active once a week or more than once a week.
3. Approximately 3%² of participants **were new to sport**, i.e. had not done sport in the previous six months.
4. The **beauty, scenery, wildlife, sensory and seasonal experiences, sense of freedom, getting away from everyday life, and atmosphere of the forest sites^{4,5}** were key drivers for participants and greatly enhanced the experience of being active in nature.
5. **14%² were 14–25 years old**. Families being active together was important, with 33% of respondents² being accompanied by at least one child under 16 years (1,801 children recorded in total). The qualitative research⁵ revealed significant benefits to women of undertaking activity in beautiful and family friendly forests.
6. The **main motivations⁴** for people to get involved in activities were to be **physically active in nature (85%), for enjoyment (77%), to get fit (62%)** and **to improve health (61%)**. The qualitative research identified further motivations of undertaking a social activity, people wanting to challenge themselves, and having a choice of activities.
7. The **four key benefits⁴** identified by over 80% were:
 - a. **Physical wellbeing**
 - b. **Fun and enjoyment**
 - c. **Mental wellbeing**
 - d. **A feeling of escape and freedom**

Mental wellbeing came out strongly as a theme in the qualitative research⁵.

¹ From the operational throughput data

² Response refers to participant survey data (n=2,206)

³ From the matched participant and follow-on survey (259 respondents matched across both surveys)

⁴ From the follow-on survey (n=274)

⁵ From the qualitative research (n=61)

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8. The top five most **popular activities were cycling, running, orienteering, bat and racket sports, and fitness**¹. All of these activities showed large positive increases in the number of visits across the pilot. Visits in the final year were at least 150% greater than those in the first year, aside from cycling. The popularity of Gruffalo orienteering demonstrates the importance of working with national sports governing bodies to develop fun forest-based activity.
9. 98%² expressed an interest in undertaking future physical activity in the participant survey. **91%³ returned to woodland for activities within three months and 77% returned to undertake a different activity.**
10. **Active Forest Coordinators played a key role** in developing physical activity opportunities on their sites, increasing the numbers of people getting involved and gathering monitoring data. This is clearly shown by the use of Cannock Chase as a comparison site. **Volunteers** also played an important part in the programme.

'I thought I knew the forest but, there's so many paths we go on, it's absolutely wonderful'. 'There are changes in the seasons, you're more observant of what is around you, you look and listen for things' (Females Delamere Forest Nordic Walking)⁵

'It's a good way of getting outside and meeting new people, there are a few new people today and some I've seen before. Coming to a place like this it's great' (Male Dalby Forest Go Tri)

'My son started mountain biking at school, cause he wanted to follow what I was doing' (Female Begebury Forest Real Spin)

Conclusions

- The AF programme shows the contribution that physical activity in attractive forests can make to all five of the broad outcomes identified in the Government's 'Sporting Future' strategy of physical wellbeing, mental wellbeing, individual development, social and community development, and economic development.
- The AF programme met SE's key targets and contributed both to helping people sustain physical activity behaviours and change behaviours by becoming more active, as well as having knock-on impacts of encouraging and enabling others to get involved.
- The programme helped to meet FCE objectives of building valued relationships with partners such as SE, providing quality experiences in beautiful locations and engaging loyal customers and new ones.
- There was strong consistency over the pilot programme in terms of the key motivations and benefits people gained from physical activities in forests.

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The key factors that combined to enable the pilot programme to be successful and which led to wellbeing outcomes included: the size and attractiveness of the forest sites, the governance of the programme, the range of activities on offer, and the AFCs being able to reach out and target a diversity of people.



Recommendations for further research

- Lessons learnt from the evaluation of the pilot programme are being taken on board in the next phase of the programme. Tracking change between the two surveys is important to explore whether activity levels have increased for the most and least active and whether there have been changes in forest visit frequency, or in the types of activities undertaken.
- Showing attribution to the AF programme between the first and follow-on survey is challenging. A new question has been added to the follow-on survey to test this issue; further work may be needed in the future to explore this in greater detail. The qualitative research illustrates the complexity of how the programme contributes to people's everyday physical activity.
- Qualitative research is needed to understand some of the barriers to being active in forests, particularly for hard to reach groups.

To see the full evaluation report go to: <http://bit.ly/activeforests>