

The Chopwell Wood Health Project

Delivering health opportunities in unique settings



The Chopwell Wood Health Project was established to research whether woodlands have a positive impact on people's health and well-being. A partnership between the Forestry Commission, the health sector and the local community was set up to examine the potential for offering local people activities set in an attractive and natural environment. Chopwell Wood is located on the outskirts of Newcastle, in a Health Action Zone with documented needs for health improvement. Through schools and General Practitioner referrals people of all ages and abilities were given the chance to experience the restorative effects of nature.

objectives

- To raise awareness of woodlands, in particular Chopwell Wood, as a resource for improving the health and well-being of people in local communities.
- To build an evidence base looking at the role of woodlands and healthy living.
- To develop and pilot practices for improving health and well-being that have the potential to be extended beyond the project and/or be adopted in other regions.
- To establish partnerships with the local community and the health sector.
- To disseminate project findings among health and forestry sectors.

actions

- The initial stages of the project saw the development of on-site interpretation and production of publicity materials.
- The team developed a programme of walks led by trained leaders.
- Two specific elements were further developed alongside local partners:
 - A GP referral pilot linked to Gateshead's Opportunities for Active Lifestyles (GOAL) Scheme: patients were referred to Chopwell for walking, cycling, Tai Chi or conservation work activities with trained leaders.
 - A series of school visits to woods, in support of Derwentside Healthy Schools programme, for physical activity and lessons on nutrition and stress reduction.
- The project was continually monitored and evaluated.

achievements

Derwentside Healthy School Programme:

- Over 200 young people and staff from four schools in Derwentside took part.
- After the visits there was a significant increase in the number of pupils who saw the wood as a 'healthy place' and increased usage by school families.
- Parents and staff felt very strongly that the project had increased awareness of healthy lifestyles and appreciation of nature in the young people.

Gateshead GOAL scheme:

- 33 GP referrals took part in the activities, with 91% of referrals completing the 13 week programme, and most continuing to participate post-programme.
- Participants reported improvements to their physical health, particularly due to weight loss, and benefited from developing a social network.
- Promotion of the project by the Project Co-ordinator contributed to a further 128 individuals participating in the programme.
- Three individuals trained to become walk leaders, six volunteers trained as Physical Activity Motivators, with one going on to train as a health advisor.

background

'Choosing Health: Making Healthy Choices Easier' (DH, 2004) sets out an active approach to public health and health inequalities. The Government white paper identifies key priorities such as reducing the risks of heart disease, strokes, cancer and obesity. It recommends working in partnership with the NHS, voluntary sector, businesses and the community to offer greater support and informed choices that will enable people to improve their health.

The health benefits of being in a natural environment are widely known. Forest Research publications - 'Health and Wellbeing: Trees, woodlands and natural spaces' (Tabbush, O'Brien, 2002) and 'Trees and Woodlands: Nature's Health Service' (O'Brien, 2004) - demonstrate how forests in particular have a positive impact on people's physical, mental and social well-being. The Chopwell Wood Health Project is one of several exemplary projects featured in 'Trees and Woodlands: Nature's Health Service', that set out to test whether this was the case and what the contributory factors might be. Chopwell Wood, a 360 ha mixed conifer and broadleaf woodland on the slopes of the Derwent valley, was selected as it is located in a Health Action Zone with documented needs for health improvement. The Chopwell Wood Health Project commenced in summer 2004 and focused on two priorities identified by Gateshead and Derwentside PCTs – A GP woodland-based activity referral scheme and a programme for school visits to support the County Durham and Darlington Healthy School standard. The walking, cycling and Tai Chi programmes have been incorporated into the GOAL Scheme run by Gateshead Community Health Team at Chopwell Wood.

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quotes

"It was fun exploring the wood and getting lost and trying to find our way back...it was really challenging...I like going on adventures and to me it was a pretty good adventure." A pupil

"You've got to do it for the simple reason it gets your body moving and it eases your aches and pains for a little while...and it is good fun." GP referral patient

partners

Forest Research
Gateshead Primary Care Trust
Derwentside Primary Care Trust
Friends of Chopwell Wood

funding

Forestry Commission
Gateshead PCT
Derwentside PCT
Friends of Chopwell Wood
Raleigh Cycles

lessons learnt

- This sort of project needs a dedicated proactive Project Co-ordinator.
- Pre and post monitoring and evaluation are crucial to development.
- Monitoring quantity and quality of physical activity was a challenge - activity diaries would have been a useful way of capturing this information.
- Many of the first-time visitors to the site were not aware of all it had to offer: more awareness would have made the initial processes easier.