

Improving levels of physical activity and health

Active England: the woodland projects

Introduction

The Active England programme was launched in 2003 with £94.8 million funding from the Big Lottery and Sport England. The goal of the programme was to increase community participation in physical activity and sport in England. There was a specific focus on sectors of society identified as under-represented in sport, including those on low incomes, black and minority ethnic groups, women and girls, under 16s, over 45s and people with disabilities.

One component of the programme focused on woodlands and in 2005/6, five three-year woodland-based projects were established, two based within Community Forests (CF), where events and activities were organised at a number of sites, and three based on single sites:

- Great Western CF in Wiltshire (CF project)
- Greenwood CF in Nottinghamshire (CF project)
- Bedgebury Forest in Kent (single site-based project)
- Haldon Forest in Devon (single site-based project)
- Rosliston in the National Forest (single site-based project)

The single site-based projects all involved an element of infrastructure improvement (e.g. the building of new trails, play areas and recreational facilities) but the CF projects did not. Community engagement and outreach work and the development of facilitated access and led activities, such as health walks, were a key part of all five projects.

Evaluation method

Evaluation of the project utilised a range of methods for data collection including:

1. On-site surveys investigating visitor profiles and types of visit ($n > 2800$ across all five sites).
2. Spatial analysis to create a profile of the population within an approximately 20 mile (32 km) radius of each site.
3. Qualitative research, targeting both project users and non-users, to identify the benefits and barriers to undertaking physical activity in woodland and green space.

Results and recommendations

The results for this study produced the following lessons learned and recommendations:

- Group activities have a high social value and this should be acknowledged in project design.
- Facilitated access and led activities are essential for reaching target groups because of the encouragement and assistance to participate that they provide people.
- Facilitated access (where people are driven to the site by mini-bus) is more resource intensive than led activities.
- Led activities are of particular importance to those who lack confidence or a partner, or are unfamiliar with a site or who need support.
- Rather than hold one-off events, led group activities should be held regularly since this is more likely to produce sustained behaviour change.
- Adequate funding and time must be allocated to outreach work with hard to reach groups and this should be factored into project design and delivery.
- Outreach and community engagement work requires adequate staff allocation and staff must be trained and supported.
- Target groups relevant to particular sites need to be identified and the necessary infrastructure and activities that will attract these groups put in place.
- Support and encouragement, as well as publicity for projects, should be focused on the local level, using existing community structures.
- Communication through local social networks and word of mouth are critical to success.
- As well as highlighting the benefits of physical activity and sport, led activities should be promoted as ways in which to meet new people in pleasant surroundings.
- Project staff should be allocated sufficient time and given support for long-term strategic and business planning, especially when changes in the types and quantities of visitors may occur.
- Volunteers should be supported and valued because they are a critical human resource which can ensure that projects have a sustained impact.

- To tackle barriers to involvement which cannot be addressed by a project's lead organisation, partnership is necessary.
- Monitoring and evaluation of projects is vital and can provide valuable information to inform policy and funding decisions.
- Monitoring and evaluation must be considered at the planning stage, before projects are operational so that appropriate baseline data can be gathered. This data can also be used by staff to inform decisions about ongoing projects and wider service delivery.

Reference

O'Brien, L. and Morris, J. (2009). *Active England: the woodland projects*. Forest Research, Farnham.