

Case Study

Healthy woods: healthy lives

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WOODLAND
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As well as providing environmental and biodiversity benefits, woods and trees are a cost effective solution to many of the big policy questions of our age. They help to reduce the negative impacts of our changing climate, support economic growth, promote healthy lifestyles and help to alleviate a range of debilitating illnesses. Together these issues are central to our well-being and quality of life. To put it succinctly, the evidence shows that life's better with trees.

Trees and green space encourage healthy lifestyles, improving public health

An ageing population is putting pressure on health and care services. An increasing proportion of the population is obese, most worryingly particularly amongst the young. Together, physical inactivity costs the NHS £1.06 billion annually. International evidence has demonstrated the critical impact trees have in encouraging more active lifestyles and alleviating the symptoms of some of our most debilitating conditions such as dementia, obesity, heart disease and mental health problems.

Trees deliver economic growth – In addition to supporting an industry which contributes £4.2 billion to the UK economy annually, trees and woods help to remediate derelict land; creating places that are more attractive for both businesses and people.

Trees help reduce the risk of flooding – The Environment Agency estimate that flooding costs the country a staggering £2.5 billion per year. Trees can help slow the rate at which rainfall runs into streams and drains, reducing the likelihood and severity of flooding while delivering extensive cost savings.

Well-designed tree planting improves air quality – The economic cost from the impacts of air pollution in the UK is estimated at £9-19 billion every year. Trees remove large amounts of air pollution, the cause of a number of lung conditions which, according to the British Lung Foundation, affect one in every seven people in the UK.

Given how important good health is to our sense of well-being and quality of life, we are very keen to showcase the Woodland Trust's VisitWoods programme and its work to maximise the health benefits of woods and trees. The case studies on the following pages tell a compelling story of the benefits achieved through increased access to woods, with a range of client groups.

NHS

£2.1 billion savings

in healthcare costs if every household in England were provided with good access to quality green space.



Only 14% of people

in England have a wood within 500m of home that they are allowed to walk in.



Only 51% of children

achieve the recommended hour of physical activity each day (girls just 38%, compared with 62% for boys)

VisitWoods.org.uk

VisitWoods worked closely with a range of people with a range of health issues. The following case studies look at the benefits of woods and trees for those groups, and how visiting and spending time in woods has contributed towards their health and wellbeing

Obesity

Dawn Hopper remembers walking in the woods regularly as a child. Her Dad used to drive her from the centre of Gateshead to enjoy the woods in the surrounding area and he taught her to identify different woodland birds. As an adult she moved near her local woodland in Hawthorn and it was when she struggled to walk even a short distance in the Dene with her husband and young daughter, she realised that she needed to lose weight.

“When I first walked down to the Hawthorn Dene I really struggled, due to my weight. I weighed about 20 stone at the time, it could have been more. But the surroundings were so lovely that I continued to make myself walk into the Dene albeit with difficulty. Over three years I lost around two stone.

In 2010 we went for a longer walk and I felt dizzy, shaky and sick. I realised that my weight and lack of fitness was really holding me back and it was time to do something about it. There was a walk which was a mile loop from my front door step and walked right through the Dene. I started to do this every night with my daughter and three years later I was walking three miles a day. I have now lost 6½ stone in weight since those early walks in the woods. Since losing the weight my confidence has increased. As well as my daily walks I have joined a dance class.”



Mental Health

Rob McBride from Shropshire suffered severe anxiety, panic attacks and depression due to heavy work pressures, stresses of modern life, along with family bereavements. Rob believes getting out in the woods helped him to recover:

“I had what my doctor called a classic burn out. I took the pills for a while and ended up just laying around the house. I was brought up to be active, playing football and cycling, and I just wanted to get out. I knew that physical exertion and green spaces can actually mend you. My GP advised me to get plenty of fresh air and exercise. Walking in the woods provided the answer.

Because your emotional state is different you can connect with nature, particularly with trees and woods. They help to repair you. I believe we're programmed to have a positive reaction to nature. Your senses are heightened, open to the sights, smells, sounds. You can close your eyes and feel protected by the trees.

From experience I know that these places are invaluable, they're worth a fortune to the nation. The health benefits to the local population will be infinite. I would say, without being too corny, that trees and getting out in to the fresh air saved my life.”



Dementia

Agnes Houston was diagnosed with Alzheimer's type dementia in 2006, aged just 57. Before her diagnosis she describes herself as a 'perfectionist', working full time as the manager of a busy chiropractor's office. Since her diagnosis she has joined the Scottish Dementia Working Group (SDWG), campaigning on many issues which would lead to more people living well with dementia; including better staff training on dementia and raising awareness of visual difficulties commonly experienced by people with dementia. She was the Chair of the Scottish Dementia Working Group for two years, is currently one of the Vice chairs of the European Working Group of People with Dementia and is a council member of Alzheimer Scotland.

As a person with dementia, Agnes has found that spending time in woodland and surrounded by nature can have a profoundly positive effect: "Nature is a great healer, it soothes you, it calms you, it makes you feel good about yourself...[When it comes to remembering a woodland visit] the fact is, I won't remember the place, but I will remember the smells and the sounds, which will trigger a memory that I had forgotten but that memory will trigger the feel-good factor and it will put the smile on my face and someone will say 'what're you smiling about?' and I'll think, you know I was at a place, I can't remember where it was but oh...did I have a good time!"



Autism

As part of our outreach work, VisitWoods East Durham invited children with autism and their families to a fun day in the woods.

Sylvia Bell's twin eight year old boys loved being able to walk in a group rather than alone. Sylvia said: "One of my boys probably wouldn't have done it if it was just the three of us, but because there was a larger group, he was happy to join in and the support of the group was really good."

Green spaces, in particular woodland, offer a calming environment giving children on the autistic spectrum an opportunity to experience new activities in soothing surroundings. Such experiences are especially valuable for people with autism because they provide a calming environment, sensory experiences that are soothing, different natural phenomena such as plants, rocks or even cloud forms that could become a focus of special interest. They also provide a chance to learn to read maps and follow instructions, opportunities to take part in activities with family and friends, developing social skills as well as exercise.





[VisitWoods.org.uk](https://www.visitwoods.org.uk)

VisitWoods is a partnership project led by the Woodland Trust which was established to significantly improve access to woods and trees across the UK, targeting a range of client groups. The initiative was funded by Natural England through their Access to Nature programme, and is part of the Big Lottery Fund Changing Spaces programme along with a range of partners including Forestry Commission (England & Scotland), Scottish Natural Heritage and People's Postcode Lottery.

The story of

You've got **5** years to increase awareness of woodland, and use of woodland for health and recreation.

Natural England

We started out with a list of woods from **412** landowners

2 million web visits later

We had increased our wood database to **10,990** woods full of enriched content.



40,000
Photos



8,000
Visitor comments



40,000
Informative icons added



1,250
Bluebell woods listed

Some great achievements:

5,500
People engaged

East Durham VisitWoods outreach officer engaged children with autism; adults with learning difficulties; excluded young people; the university of the third age and a single father's group.

411
Leaders trained



Discover Woods programme. Youth leaders can now take young people out into the woods for educational and recreational benefits. Between them they have taken 5,600 young people into the woods for a unique educational experience.



dementia adventure
250 +
People

Families and people with dementia have benefited from our work with **Dementia Adventure** facilitating woodland visits for care home residents and their families and carers.

4,000
Carers & families reached

Visitwoods reached families and carers of children with autism in the South East with their booklet resource enabling them to plan visits to local woodland, parks and national nature reserves.



Thanks to our volunteers and...



Scottish Natural Heritage
All of nature for all of Scotland



The Woodland Trust urge policy makers to...

- **Take a more ambitious, strategic approach to the use of tree cover and green space across a range of agendas** – including: economic regeneration, improved public health, reduction of flood risk, carbon sequestration and support for biodiversity
- **Provide better protection for woods and trees through the planning system, ensuring their role as a public health resource is safeguarded for future generations**
- **Increase public involvement in the planning and management of green space.** Processes such as neighbourhood planning should generate opportunities for community care for nature
- **Recognise the savings to the public purse that can be achieved by using wooded green space as a preventative health care tool.** This is particularly critical in the design of new built developments. This should be complemented by increased resources to encourage active and healthy lifestyles through visits to woods close to where people live
- **Adopt access standards to ensure everyone has reasonable access to woodland** – Nobody should live more than 500 metres from accessible woodland of no less than 2 hectares. Furthermore, there should also be at least one area of accessible woodland of no less than 20 hectares within 4 kilometres of people's homes.



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