

Forestry England's Feel Good in the Forest - Embedding Green Social Prescribing Within Local Authorities

Green Social Prescribing Process Journey



Background

[Feel Good in the Forest](#) is a social prescribing initiative from Forestry England and Sport England, designed to support people with mild to moderate health conditions through nature-based activities. It operates across four forest hubs - Chopwell Wood, Guisborough Forest, the National Forest, and Thames Chase Community Forest - all selected due to the health inequalities present in surrounding areas. The programme promotes wellbeing through nature and physical activity, using hub insights to guide national Green Social Prescribing across Forestry England. Feel Good in the Forest is supported by local Voluntary, Community, Faith, and Social Enterprise (VCFSE), health & volunteer networks working together to make forests more accessible and inclusive.

This process journey explores how Forestry England engaged with **Local Authorities** to embed Feel Good in the Forest in their strategy and delivery at two hub sites: [Chopwell Wood](#) and [Thames Chase Community Woodlands](#).

Thames Chase Community Woodlands

About the Area

Thames Chase Community Woodlands is a network of woodlands in the London Borough of Havering, North-East London, serving communities with low physical activity levels, an ageing population, and rising child poverty.

Our Approach

Over five years, Forestry England built a connection with Havering Council.

- **Years 1 & 2:** Initial engagement was slow due to council structures, staff turnover, limited resources, and low recognition of Forestry England's people-focused approach, but Active Forest's funding allowed us to offer free or low-cost activities to support relationship building
 - **Years 3 & 4:** Connections grew with council contacts, including Public Health leads. These connections proved pivotal, as the programme was formally included in the Healthy Weight Strategy (see below)
 - **Year 5:** Relationships continued to develop, with Forestry England hosting the Live Well Havering Network Partnership event (see below). Active support from key contacts, including the Head of Libraries, further enabled promotion.
- Key initiatives we've delivered together include:
- **Healthy Weight Strategy:** Feel Good in the Forest is highlighted within the 'People' section of the strategy as a way of supporting physical wellbeing in nature. We are a key stakeholder in the Healthy Weight System Network meetings and events
 - **Live Well Havering Partnership Network:** We hosted the first Live Well Havering Partnership Network meeting in person at Thames Chase, attended by over 60 staff from local authority, NHS and VCFSE services
 - **Outreach nature-based talks** in community settings such as Warm Hubs and food banks
 - **Bespoke forest days** for local authority teams and voluntary and community organisations through public health and Live Well connections.



Our Impact

Forestry England's partnership with Havering Council has acted as a catalyst to build new partnerships with community health and wellbeing contacts and, in turn, to connect local communities with nature.

Impact on participants and community:

- Participants from outreach talks, such as at food banks, value nature experiences brought to them and have welcomed further activities.
- Attendees from local authority and partner organisations at the Live Well Havering Network event, hosted at Thames Chase Forest Centre, reported deep connection and meaningful engagement, praising the forest setting as a place for authentic networking
- Patrick Odling-Smee, Director of Live Well Havering, called Forestry England's work at Thames Chase "*an amazing resource for the people of Havering.*"



Next Steps

Thames Chase and partners are deepening strategic collaboration with Havering Council and the local health system. Working with Health Champions and using a council asset map, they aim to embed

nature-based outreach and link Active Forests priorities, while co-design with the council ensures alignment, shared ownership, and strengthened initiatives.

OUR TOP TIP:

Work with council staff to identify synergy between your project and their objectives.



Chopwell Wood

About the Area

Chopwell Wood is located near the village of Chopwell in Gateshead. Gateshead is the 47th most deprived local authority in England, out of 317 local authorities. Around 32,700 (16%) people in Gateshead live in one of the 10% most deprived areas of England.

Our Approach

Our relationship with Public Health began in 2020, sparked by a networking event we organised in Chopwell Wood for local health and charity organisations, which was attended by Gateshead's Public Health Programme Lead. Fostering this connection has led to a cascade of opportunities.

Key initiatives we've delivered together include:

- **Making Every Contact Count (MECC) Training:** Forestry England staff and volunteers completed MECC training to boost confidence in health conversations. We co-produced a forest-based training video, hosted on the MECC training platform, showing how everyday conversations can support wellbeing. Local service info is included in welcome packs and displayed in Chopwell's indoor space
- **Blood Pressure Monitoring:** As part of Gateshead's *Healthy Hearts* initiative, volunteers at Chopwell Wood were trained to take visitors' blood pressure and offer wellbeing advice
- **Events & Programmes:** Forestry England hosts and supports a range of health-focused activities, including the *Better Health at Work Awards*, *Feel Good Health Day* with the Melissa Bus and woodland activities, the summer *Code Breakers Challenge* for families, and the Pride-focused *Colour Run* co-developed with OutNorthEast and Public Health
- **Strategic Engagement:** Forestry England is part of the Sector Led Improvement Board for Physical activity and Healthy Weight Alliance.



Our Impact

On Community:

- The visibility of Chopwell Wood as a health-promoting space has grown, with more families and individuals returning for multiple activities. Recorded active visits to Chopwell Woods have increased from 21,766 in 2022/23 to 108,327 in 2024/25
- There has been a noticeable increase in referrals as our reputation has grown. This has made it easier to fill spaces in new activities and sustain engagement. In 2022/23 we recorded 1,749 visits as part of Feel Good in the Forest; in the first two quarters alone of 2025/26, we've recorded 1,234 visits as part of Feel Good in the Forest.

On System Change:

- Over the past four years, our partnership delivery with Gateshead Public Health has engaged more than **750 participants**, contributing to a growing culture of outdoor physical activity in Gateshead—particularly in the west of the borough where services have traditionally been less concentrated
- We've contributed to a societal shift in awareness around the benefits of being outdoors for mental and physical health
- Louise Harlanderson, Public Health Programme Lead, Gateshead Public Health said of our partnership: *“Gateshead Public Health have gained knowledge, partnerships, and expertise from working with the staff in Chopwell Woods, to showcase to communities the benefits of being active in nature.”*



Next steps

We're planning a new physical activity trail at Chopwell Wood with Public Health, to promote physical activity, and the Public Health Programme Lead is keen to work from the woods, which could strengthen collaboration and visibility.

Transport access is a major challenge, despite being on a bus route. The mile walk

from the bus stop limits participation, so a volunteer or community transport scheme would help.

We'd like to explore a more formalised partnership with Public Health and expand our links with charities like Age UK and organisations such as Rise, the local Active Partnership, to support our delivery.

OUR TOP TIP:

Find out what your local public health team's priorities are for the coming year, then think about how nature can support that priority.



Lessons Learned

Despite being in two very different geographical areas, our lessons learned at Thames Chase and Chopwell Wood are very similar.

1. **Hosting local authority and sector staff in the forest** created meaningful engagement, enabled us to link with allies in the system, strengthened relationships, and embedded *Feel Good in the Forest* into local strategies.
2. **Our consistent, open, and flexible approach** with free/low-cost activities aligned with Public Health priorities, provided a constant source of support amid changing staffing and funding; building relationships with key contacts is crucial.

Forestry England's Tips

- Build trust through relationships, not paperwork
- Test & pilot ideas; impact often follows experimentation
- Find your unique-selling-point
- Celebrate small wins and stay persistent through challenges
- Let the community shape your offer.



“As these two process journeys show, we’ve come a long way in 5 years! Forestry England has gone from little recognition to having *Feel Good in the Forest* embedded in council strategy, with on-site meetings and active Public Health support.

We’re committed to growing this work to ensure nature-based health support is accessible, inclusive, and embedded in local health systems.”

Forestry England

Further information:

- The evaluation report for the pilot phase, completed by Forest Research, is available at: [Active Forests evaluation: social prescribing pilot - Forest Research](#)
- A full evaluation of *Feel Good in the Forest* 2023-2026 will be available in 2026. Case studies from the current delivery are available at [Active Forests evaluation: Phase 3 ‘Removing Barriers’ - Forest Research](#)
- Email: active.forests@forestryengland.uk



This Process Journey was commissioned by The National Academy for Social Prescribing on behalf of the [cross-Government Green Social Prescribing Programme to Tackle and Prevent Mental Ill Health](#).