

The great outdoors

Simon Birch investigates the contribution of green spaces to mental and physical wellbeing.

Gill

Gill Grievson is a Community Liason Officer with the Greenwood Community Forest in Nottinghamshire

The Greenwood Community Forest was established by the Countryside Agency in 1989 in the former Nottinghamshire coalfields, an area of multiple deprivation.

Since then we've planted over two and a half million trees and helped to totally transform the abandoned colliery sites and created new areas of woodland on the derelict land.

When we were constructing the pathways through the forest it was really important for us to be as inclusive as possible and we worked hard at improving access for all users.

In partnership with other organisations we produced a series of walking guides for the forest called Break Free. The idea behind the project was to give people the information so that they could make up their own minds whether they wanted to access the greenspaces or not.

The guides have proved to be a great success and in 2003 the walks won the Heart of England Tourist Board 'Tourism For All' Gold Award.

The health benefits of accessing green spaces is well documented and the evidence shows that apart from improving physical health there's a definite improvement in mental health as well just by being outside and surrounded by nature.

What we're trying to show is that rather

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Gill Grievson, Nottinghamshire

than going to the gym you can just as easily improve your health by walking in the forest.

Research that we've commissioned however has highlighted the fact that even though people may have easy access to open spaces they're not always going to take part in physical activity.

It may be that people don't know what's out there or don't know what to expect or even think that it's not for them.

The most important thing we've learned is not to make assumptions about what people want. It's all about talking and listening to people and finding out what their needs are and then providing the solutions to these needs.



Gill Grievson (left) and Joan Yarnell

Photography: UNP

Joan

Joan Yarnell lives near Nottingham and is a freelance diversity and equality trainer.

I became involved with the Greenwood Community Forest because I'm a freelance diversity and equality trainer and gave advice on the accessibility of the planned walks in the forest.

I was able to offer feedback from the point of view of wheelchair users such as myself but also gave input for the needs of other groups such as older people, blind people and those with limited mobility who need to use a walking stick.

Everybody has the right to the same access to resources such as the community forest and this includes disabled and older people.

Being able to get out into the countryside is

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Joan Yarnell, Nottinghamshire

such a terrific thing. To begin with, not only does it help you get fit and stay healthy, it's a social thing as well. For example, you can go for a picnic with your family and even though you're disabled you know that you can get out there so you're not isolated.

If I didn't know that these walks were wheelchair friendly I wouldn't want to go as I wouldn't want to embarrass my friends and family or cause any fuss in case there was a problem. As a disabled person you often feel like this when you'd like to go somewhere.

Whenever I go for a walk in the forest I find it very therapeutic as it's so peaceful and it gives you time to think. Plus I love seeing the flowers and watching the different birds and other wildlife, you get a total feeling of well being.

Sometimes as a disabled person you feel like a second-class citizen but on the walks I feel that I really belong as I can do the same thing as everybody else. Every time I come back home I'm always on a high and I'm laughing and full of energy. It's just wonderful.

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