



Case Study 1: Improving health and well-being

Faithwoodlands

Providing both improved quality of life and educational opportunities



Achievements

This association between an inter-faith group and an environmental body is beginning to deliver a real health dividend. The Luton Council of Faiths and the Forestry Commission have teamed up to address social exclusion and health issues in Bedfordshire.

A suitable site has been selected and a Forest Ranger has hosted several walks with both mixed and single faith groups, including Muslim men and women. These have demonstrated that an understanding and enjoyment of the outdoor environment rises quickly and that in time social inclusion will be improved, whilst physical and mental ill health will commensurately fall.

Background

Parts of Luton and Bedford are amongst the most deprived areas in the East of England with higher early mortality rates and incidence of heart disease than elsewhere. Both towns have significant Black Minority Ethnic (BME) populations.

Research has found that this BME group is under-represented as visitors to greenspace and nature sites. A significant body of evidence shows there are health, well-being and educational benefits to be derived from such contact. Thus encouraging these communities' involvement with natural recreational sites is potentially highly beneficial.

Initiative description

By working through established faith communities, with a suitable woodland site, access by Luton BMEs to the countryside has been encouraged and the 'woodland bonus' (of health, education and recreation) attained.

Lessons learned

The combination of inter-faith groups, with their prodigious community outreach capabilities, coupled to the Forestry Commission's extensive woodland resource is a distinct success factor. However, cultural barriers remain, so continuity of effort and persistence are equally vital if the valuable woodland bonus is to be realised amongst BMEs. Mixed parties of faith visitors have also demonstrated there is considerable integration potential.

Future developments

With the arrival of funding a programme of site development is underway with the installation of benches and the activity programme is expanding. Over the next year, along with guided walks, will be picnics, storytelling, worship and contemplation events, outdoor discussions and a schools programme. A wide cross-section of faith groups will be participating.

This promising start is also encouraging the scheme's extension to other accessible areas of woodland in Bedfordshire, as well as elsewhere in the UK.