

# Woods In and Around Towns (WIAT)

Influences on psychological wellbeing in deprived urban areas



**In brief:** A four-year, collaborative assessment of the effectiveness of Forestry Commission Scotland's **Woods In and Around Towns (WIAT)** programme to improve quality of life in deprived communities along Scotland's 'central belt'.

**Funding body:** National Institute for Health Research Public Health Research Programme (project number 10/3005/18)

**Duration:** 2012 - 2016, published 2017

**Academic team:** OPENspace research centre at the **University of Edinburgh** and **Heriot-Watt University**; Stockholm Environment Institute at the **University of York**; Institute of Health and Wellbeing at the **University of Glasgow**; Department of Social and Environmental Health Research at the **London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine**

*"Woodlands close to our communities are often undervalued assets. WIAT, and the research by OPENspace measuring its effect, allows us to understand the importance of these assets and teaches us how to make them work for health and wellbeing."*

*- George Morris, Consultant in Environmental Health & Former Science Policy Adviser in Scottish Government*

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**NHS**  
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Spanning ten years and two phases, **Woods In and Around Towns (WIAT)** is a Forestry Commission Scotland initiative to improve quality of life in Scotland's urban and post-industrial areas through community access to new or regenerated woodland. To date, WIAT has brought 11,000 hectares of neglected woodland back into active management, created 1,400 hectares of new urban woodland and created or upgraded over 300 miles of footpaths.

Building on evidence that green spaces may positively influence mental health, our study looks specifically at the impact of WIAT on the psychological wellbeing and stress levels of people living in deprived communities. Running from 2012 to 2016 (with publication in 2017), it is designed to take advantage of WIAT as a natural experiment along Scotland's 'central belt'.

This is a controlled study involving a repeat cross-sectional survey of residents living within 1.5 km of six Scottish sites: three where local woods are changed (through the installation of new paths and signage, for example); and three where they are not. The comparison element will help us to determine if any changes we see in the communities' mental health can be attributed to WIAT. Data is being collected in three waves: before any changes are made to the woodlands (2013); after physical changes have been made (2014); and again after further social interventions, like organised walks, have taken place (2015). Through an environmental audit, we are carefully monitoring what actually changes in the woodlands, both physically and contextually.

We are using a standard way of measuring how stressed people are, the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS), and a range of other methods to achieve secondary, self-reported outcomes related to factors such as physical activity, perception and use of the woodlands, connectedness to nature and social cohesion.

We are looking for answers to some specific questions, such as: are local people's stress levels going down as their environment improves; if so, are the benefits felt equally across the community, or do men benefit more than women, for example?

## Useful websites

[www.openspace.eca.ed.ac.uk](http://www.openspace.eca.ed.ac.uk)  
[www.nets.nihr.ac.uk](http://www.nets.nihr.ac.uk)  
[www.forestry.gov.uk/wiat](http://www.forestry.gov.uk/wiat)

## Protocol paper

Silveirinha de Oliveira, E., Aspinall, P., Briggs, A., Cummins, C., Leyland, A. H., Mitchell, R., Roe, J. and Ward Thompson, C. (2013).

**How effective is the Forestry Commission Scotland's woodland improvement programme Woods In and Around Towns (WIAT) at improving psychological well-being in deprived urban communities? A quasi-experimental study in**  
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