

# Creating a Forest for Learning



## How the National Forest in the UK has developed an Outdoor-Based Learning Project

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### 1 Twenty five Years of Groundwork

The National Forest has the potential to be one of the biggest and most exciting open-air classrooms in the country. With increasing emphasis now being placed upon the natural world through the national curriculum ... it will also be a dynamic, practical demonstration of how local, national and global environmental issues interact with one another. (Countryside Commission, 1994)

This prescient paragraph was written not in 2020 in the midst of the global pandemic, but in 1994, when the UK's National Forest published its first strategy document.

The concept of the National Forest had been developed in the mid-1980s by a visionary team in the Countryside Commission. They identified the potential for bringing multi-purpose forestry (that is, forestry for both commercial and environmental benefit as well as for recreation and leisure) near to where people live and work in lowland England. It was a radical concept. At that time, 'forestry' in the UK had a poor reputation (Aldhous, 1997). There was a widely held perception that decades of government-funded national planting of fast-growing non-native conifers had been done unsympathetically, doing little for native biodiversity. Planting mixed native woodlands nearer to people could maximise the social, environmental and economic benefits that a modern forest could offer, where trees would be part of a living landscape and part of the fabric of people's lives. The English Midlands, a distinctly non-forested part of the UK, was selected as the location for this ambitious project. It was to be called the 'national' forest as it was to be an example to the

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**Fig. 1** Coal mining in the heart of what has become the National Forest. Forest cover in this area has more than tripled. Photo credit: The Magic Attic

country: if this could work here, it could work anywhere. Trees and forestry would be shown to be a driver for regeneration and transformation even in one of the most unlikely of places.

An area of 200 square miles bordered by the cities of Leicester, Derby and Birmingham was chosen, with support from local communities being a crucial part of the decision to place it here.

Before the National Forest began, forest cover in this area stood around 6%, one of the lowest in the country. The central part of the Forest area was the former Midland Coalfield, where deep and open cast coal mining and clay extraction had employed thousands of people. The closure of the pits in the 1980s had left generations of families unemployed and the landscape damaged and scarred (Fig. 1). To their credit, they welcomed the opportunity to repair this by creating a forest.

It has been a forest grown from the ground up, in all senses.

## **2 Developing Environmental Education in the Forest**

The small team at the National Forest Company (NFC), the organisation established in 1995 by the UK government to lead the creation and development of the National

Forest, began to work with passion, persuasion and a tight budget<sup>1</sup> to cultivate relationships with both local landowners and communities to create the Forest. One of the first tasks of the newly appointed Community Liaison Officer was to establish “environmental education to help foster understanding and appreciation of the Forest.” (Countryside Commission, 1994).

The drive for environmental education in the Forest came from a commitment to ensure that the next generation growing up here would have a true connection to their surroundings. In a place where trees, woodland and the concept of ‘forest’ were not previously part of the culture, giving young people an understanding of the Forest, and empowering them to care for and defend it, would give the best chance for the Forest to survive and thrive over generations to come.

These young people did not come from families of foresters. Individuals were more likely to have a heritage of mining, brick making or farming; many other things than looking after trees.

By the time the first strategic plans for the Forest were being drawn up in 1994, activities with young people already included tree planting, developing nature areas in school grounds, promoting growing trees from seed, giving talks to schools and student groups and developing teachers’ packs.

It was also identified early on that for the full potential of this work to be realised, long-term partnerships would have to be developed with education authorities, policy makers and funders, teacher training colleges, arts boards and other specialist organisations.

Between 1994 and 2001, two visitor centres in the Forest opened and became the main hubs for activity to deliver environmental education: Rosliston Forestry Centre near Burton upon Trent and Conkers Discovery Centre near Ashby de la Zouch. Along with planting trees (often in the wind, rain and mud—tree planting taking place between November and March each year), children had fun as they learnt about bug hunting in dead wood piles, animals preparing for winter, the tough life of a tree and more.

By 2015, 500,000 children in and around the National Forest had taken part in environmental education activities such as these. They came from local rural and urban schools within the Forest itself and, when funds were available, from inner city schools in the surrounding cities of Derby, Leicester and Birmingham. This work was made possible by generous support over many years from committed partners such as Derby-based Rolls-Royce, demonstrating another aspect of the longstanding work to grow and embed the National Forest in the local consciousness with businesses and communities.

However, at the National Forest we still faced the same problems as the rest of the country for outdoor learning in our primary schools. Delivering the standard curriculum was seen as a very indoors matter at this time and a trip outdoors was an

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<sup>1</sup> £60 m of public money was spent on creating and developing the National Forest in the first 25 years, “equivalent to two miles of three-lane motorway.” <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2016/aug/07/national-forest-woodland-midlands-regeneration>.

exception, a treat, a day out. Our goal was to truly embed time spent in the outdoors and outdoor learning within children's everyday activities.

The early findings of the Natural Connections Demonstration Project (Waite et al., 2016, see chapter “[Natural Connections: Learning About Outdoor-Based Learning](#)” in this volume) reinforced the importance of tackling barriers and providing supportive networks for schools, and there was growing discussion and interest throughout the sector in the holistic benefits of learning outdoors (Department for Education and Skills, 2006).

What better for the aspirations of this growing teenage forest? To become a space not only for bug hunting and shelter building, but also somewhere where children could grow with the intrinsic benefits of being out in nature, showing how an outdoor classroom can free up a child's imagination and engagement. Outdoor learning in woodland offers very special advantages: shade, a wonderful quality of light, variety of tactile experiences as well as the chance to climb trees, make things from trees, and forage from the woodland floor. A woodland is truly immersive and engaging, not just a backdrop.

By 2016 more than 8 million trees had been planted in the National Forest, forest cover had increased from 6 to 20% and hundreds of new woodlands had been created, the majority of which had public access. We had also started to bring together our thinking about how to reach all the children in the Forest, and how this would help us develop an intrinsic forest culture and help our communities feel at ease out in the woods. We realised that the most effective way to do this was to use the existing schools' infrastructure. After all, we had 25 years of experience in building up partnerships with schools.

Our understanding was that nearly a third of all primary schools in the Forest were doing no outdoor learning activity at all and the majority of those that were, offered it on an ad hoc basis and were not maximising the use of their own school grounds or staff resources.

We then had a breakthrough moment when we discovered the Audemars Piguet Foundation—a corporate foundation with a mission “to support worldwide forest conservation through environmental protection and youth awareness-raising endeavours” (Foundation Audemars Piguet, 2021). We could hardly believe our eyes. It was the perfect funder for the work we hoped to do and a great opportunity to join forces with a philanthropic partner.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Many organisations trying to encourage outdoor learning are faced with the reality that without the support of philanthropic foundations, these important projects cannot be run, given that dedicated state funding for this is limited.

### 3 2016 Creating a Forest for Learning: Funding Opportunity

Our proposal was to build on our substantial experience of environmental education work and bring about a step change in provision across the whole Forest—to challenge and support every primary school in the National Forest to achieve a minimum level of regular provision for outdoor learning, ‘regular’ meaning at least once a month.

Our experience had shown that, although popular, outdoor learning was often considered specialist teaching and was presented in different ways by different external providers. Although there was some very good learning being delivered, this model was not helping to engage schoolteachers, or the school itself, to fully embrace an outdoor learning culture.

When we asked schools what was holding them back, the same barriers cropped up repeatedly: the cost of transport to take children off-site, the lack of specialist expertise of teachers within schools, the perceived risk and time of arranging out of classroom sessions, and the absence of facilities within the school grounds.

We found that schools that offered regular provision were most likely those with extensive grounds or who could afford transport, and that funding was available for others, but was often sporadic.

Costs associated with the activity were in many cases being met by the parents, and this inevitably meant that outdoor learning was a one-off treat rather than a regular part of the curriculum. We wanted to ensure that all children in the Forest could have access to outdoor learning, regardless of their background or their school.

Our approach was designed to address these barriers by focusing on building capacity within the schools themselves by funding training for teachers and infrastructure improvements to ensure every primary school could provide regular outdoor learning provision within the school grounds or within walking distance. The ultimate goal was to embed outdoor learning within each School Plan so that it became an accepted and expected part of school life for children, staff and parents.

We had some experience of facilitating teacher training over the previous years in the form of a series of one-day training sessions for teachers, covering Forest School<sup>3</sup> activities, woodland crafts, music, arts and literacy. They were often over-subscribed, and we had increasing demand from teachers wanting to develop their skills and gain confidence.

We had also worked with dozens of schools in the early days of the Forest offering tree planting days on site to encourage them to feel part of this exciting new initiative to create a Forest (Fig. 2). We therefore knew there were many school grounds throughout the Forest with young trees. These just needed a bit of tender loving

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<sup>3</sup> Forest School is a developmental ethos shared by thousands of trained practitioners throughout the world. It is a child-centred holistic learning process, developing confidence and self-esteem through learner inspired, hands on experiences in a natural, forest setting. Creating a Forest for Learning in the National Forest follows this philosophy, but layered with the desire to develop young citizens of the National Forest.



**Fig. 2** Pupils creating future outdoor learning spaces. Photo credit: Steve Baker/National Forest Company

care to be able to create little glades that could offer space for shelters to be rigged up under the branches, provide ample material for kindling, whittling and artwork, and give inspiration for creative writing and exciting spaces for science and maths studies.

For those schools without such spaces within their grounds, we knew the majority had woodlands and green spaces nearby. Our proposed funding model would make it possible for a school to work with a neighbouring woodland owner who could apply for funding to cover any necessary adaptations to make the space suitable as an outdoor classroom, giving the school access to outdoor learning within walking distance.

We wanted to make it as easy and seamless as possible for teaching and learning to take place outdoors in a wooded setting on a systematic and regular basis. Audemars Piguet Foundation approved of our plan and provided the funding that enabled us to embark on a substantial three-year programme.

#### **4 2017—The Start of Creating a Forest for Learning (CF4L)**

We appointed a dedicated Education Officer, and the project was launched formally in June 2017 with an event where policy makers and leaders were invited to walk in

the woods and join children from two schools in the Forest to take part in various activities from fire lighting to leaf printing, natural art to insect study. Our goals for the first three years were:

- To ensure half of all primary schools in the Forest were using an outdoor wooded space within easy walking distance, year-round. The remaining schools to be aware of the opportunities and support available and making plans.
- To create a vibrant and active network of mutually supportive Forest Schools practitioners and outdoor educators.
- To develop a network of teachers who were confident in their knowledge and understanding of the Forest, liaising with landowners and being part of an active network.
- To devise relevant training and determine programmes of support with established demand for delivery of these resources, including a single point of contact at NFC and visits to each school to meet with grounds staff, teaching staff and leadership.
- To establish an awards scheme with at least 30 schools aspiring to achieve the award.
- To create a record of current education provision in the Forest that would provide a benchmark against which future progress could be measured and a clear strategy to support, guide and advocate the development of sustainable outdoor learning provision into the future.

We were also working towards outcomes of the project beyond these three years to ensure that:

- Every primary school in the Forest has access to a woodland setting as a regular learning space for teaching within school grounds or within walking distance.
- Every primary school has teaching staff trained in Forest School and/or environmental education techniques.
- A sustainable network of support for teachers with a financially sustainable training programme is in place.
- Partner organisations in the Forest are coordinating outdoor learning delivery, sharing best practice, and supporting each other.
- Outdoor learning is beginning to be embedded into each primary school's ethos and culture.
- An exemplar model of sustainable outdoor learning provision would exist and could be replicated nationally and internationally.

## **5 The National Landscape and Our Five Point Plan for Outdoor Learning**

Midway through the project we presented an interim report at a National Forest event at the Houses of Parliament (National Forest Company, 2018). The national landscape was developing by this time: people were talking more about children's

mental health and recognising the challenges they faced in the 21st century. Public Health England had found that 28% of children aged two to 15 were overweight or obese (Public Health England, 2017) and a 2017 survey showed one in eight 5- to 19-year-olds had suffered at least one mental health disorder (NHS Digital, 2018). The government was also taking notice, embedding aims based on connecting people with nature specifically for mental health benefits into their 2018 25-year plan (HM Government, 2018). The importance of creating a connection with nature for young people was becoming increasingly apparent. Creating a Forest for Learning felt increasingly like core work for our vision of the National Forest—transforming lives as well as the landscape.

We summarised our ambition in a Five Point Plan for Outdoor Learning in the National Forest, and used it in communications with schools, parents, funders and partners. It set out our aims to encourage every primary school in the National Forest to have:

1. A monthly programme of outdoor learning sessions all year round
2. At least one Forest School trained teacher/teaching assistant
3. An outdoor wooded learning space within the school grounds or within walking distance
4. Outdoor learning included as a key part of the school improvement plan
5. Access to a supportive network of outdoor learning professionals and high quality off-site outdoor learning provision.

We saw this five-point plan as an expression of our exemplar role as the ‘national’ forest: it could provide a template to be rolled out across the country as a simple cost-effective approach to reconnecting the next generation with the natural world, creating positive change for learning, wellbeing and the environment.

The simplicity of our approach demonstrated that relatively straightforward activities and modest funding could make a real and lasting difference: training teaching staff, creating outdoor learning areas and supporting schools to build their confidence and experience. Resources invested in improving school facilities and the expertise of teaching staff were helping to build their commitment to ongoing provision of outdoor learning. Our investment to this point had been hundreds rather than thousands of pounds per school per year and yet was having a dramatic impact on outdoor learning provision in schools throughout the Forest.

Our approach showed that affordable outdoor learning could be undertaken regularly by primary schools with all their children. It was also evidence that outdoor learning could be used for any lessons—literacy, numeracy or science as much as for particular environmental themes—and could happen all year round, changing with the seasons and weather conditions (Fig. 3).

We were also beginning to work towards taking this approach to other stages of education, looking to develop new programmes for secondary schools based on the increased confidence and wellbeing that outdoor learning can bring to older students, and work with pre-schools to provide early experiences of fun and learning through play in the outdoors.





**Fig. 3** Outdoor learning in the National Forest. Photo credit: Darren Cresswell/National Forest Company

We were learning more about the needs of schools and barriers they faced to taking up outdoor learning. We took time to map the gaps in provision and gaps in woodlands within easy reach of schools. We facilitated a specialist network of outdoor learning professionals that schools could approach for advice as well as ourselves, and were beginning to develop plans for creating champion schools to foster confidence in those schools who were just starting out. We also realised that we had to identify champions within the schools themselves: teachers or governors with a passion for outdoor learning who could advocate for it within the school's management.

Once expertise within the school developed, more advanced sessions would begin to take place and where limited wooded learning space was available in school grounds off-site visits would follow, making the most of the proximity of diverse woodland throughout the Forest.

## **6 Examples of Success in First Stage: Champion Schools**

We developed a number of champion schools who embodied our five-point plan and who were already sharing their best practice with others.

## Woodstone

This school had an enthusiastic headteacher and one Forest School trained teacher in 2017 but they were unsure where to go next. CF4L helped to train further staff in Forest School and provided Continued Professional Development training in outdoor learning for all the staff, including the site manager.

In 2018 they successfully hosted woodland management training for 14 other schools. Woodstone showcased the project in a news item for regional television and featured in our Forest for Learning Five Point Plan document and National Forest campaign video.

Funders Audemars Piguet Foundation visited the school in October 2018 as an outstanding example of how established outdoor learning is in the school, and how the funding has enabled this. They also saw the huge value for children in outdoor learning through building the teaching staff's confidence and skills. Woodstone has even added an outdoor learning question to their interviews for teachers, to ensure they appoint people with interest and enthusiasm for the work.

Woodstone has reported extraordinary benefits for the children who have been learning outdoors:

We have seen a huge positive impact on the children who have been taking part in our Forest School programme; in particular the children's confidence, communication and team working skills have greatly developed. It has also impacted positively on the children's mental health, which is a key focus on our school development plan this year. We have seen a big impact in the classroom; the children are making accelerated progress due to them building on and developing these important positive learning behaviours. *Patrick Mullins (Headteacher) Woodstone Primary School*

## Fountains

Fountains is a special school for children with a range of learning and physical difficulties. Fountains is committed to giving pupils the opportunity to learn in an outdoor environment and believe that taking learning outside is good for promoting self-esteem, wellbeing, sociable behaviour, co-operative learning and problem solving.

CF4L supported and helped fund an enthusiastic teacher from Fountains in their Forest School training. The school has now seen how these skills feed positively back into classroom work and other settings, and the positive impact it is having on the children.

Throughout the project, Fountains have remained engaged, attending woodland management training, attending the FEN (Forest Education Network) Conference held in the Forest in 2019 and currently running a National Forest schools' network for schools to meet and share outdoor learning ideas and successes. With support from CF4L the primary school is now supporting the secondary school in developing their outdoor learning.

## Awards Programme

We introduced Forest for Learning Awards covering four categories:

- Inspirational beginnings
- Creative use of space
- Use of local woodlands
- Sharing best practice.

We presented 52 schools with an award matching their particular achievements and celebrated all the schools at an event at the National Forest's Timber festival. We invited key outdoor learning partners to the event leading to a great sharing of ideas, contacts and making plans for the future.

## 7 Funding Extended 2019–2024

After successfully achieving our goals set out in 2016, we were delighted to have our funding extended from 2019 to 2024. We had achieved 50% of all primary schools in the Forest offering regular outdoor learning sessions. We had created a vibrant network of supportive teachers and practitioners, with 12 champion schools, and had set up an awards scheme with at least 30 schools aspiring to achieve the award. Senior and head teachers were becoming advocates for outdoor learning in their schools and with other schools locally, having seen the positive impact on children's behaviour.

We developed our exemplar role further by establishing new partnerships to secure additional funding from UK central government to work with schools in disadvantaged areas beyond the immediate Forest boundary. Forest Foxes, a partnership between the NFC, Leicester City in the Community (the community foundation of English Premier League football club Leicester City) and the Forest School Association, was set up as one of five Community Forest and Woodland Outreach projects under the national Children and Nature programme, working to foster opportunities for children to spend time in nature, with the benefits this can have for their health and wellbeing and how they engage with their education.

I would also like to thank you for going beyond planting, by continuing to improve engagement with local authorities, local businesses and local communities. Your successful bid to the National Lottery Heritage Fund for £2.7 million, and £0.5 million from Audemars Piguet Foundation, Morrisons Foundation and Defra/Natural England in partnership with Leicester City Football Club Community Trust are great examples of this. *The Rt Hon Lord Goldsmith of Richmond Park, Minister of State*

We were poised to make such good progress and then the Covid-19 pandemic hit.

## 8 Creating a Forest for Learning—Progress by April 2021

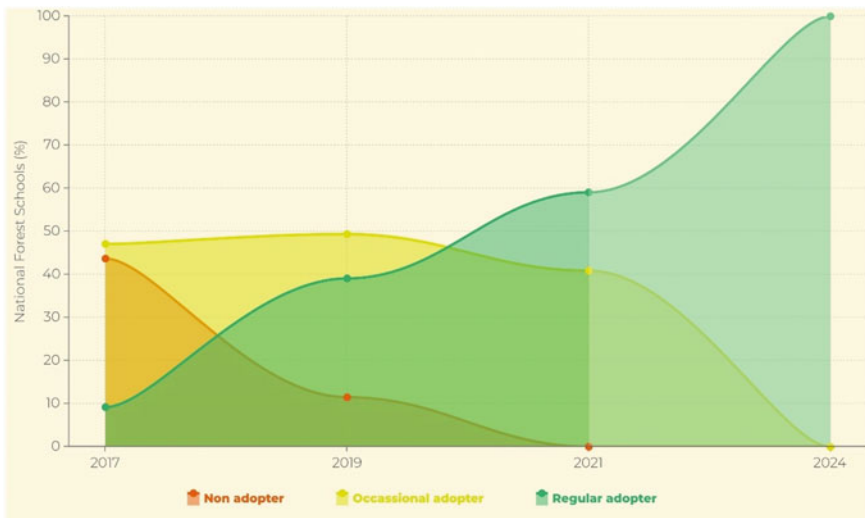
The pandemic had a huge impact on the project due to the restrictions placed on schools, the NFC and the Forest itself. However, the NFC Education Officer remained in contact with schools and local outdoor learning practitioners to enable school staff

to receive support in re-thinking their activities in the light of the pandemic. Funding for essential grounds maintenance, the production of online training videos and the development of virtual networks and digital conferencing meant that engagement with primary schools developed exceptionally well through this challenging time.

Despite the difficulties, by April 2021 the project had achieved:

- Over 90% of all primary schools in the Forest taking part in some outdoor learning.
- 59% of all primary schools taking part in regular outdoor learning.
- All primary schools within the National Forest aware of opportunities to engage in outdoor learning (Fig. 4).

In addition to the headline success in working with primary schools, the aspiration to extend the work into secondary schools continues. This has been massively compromised by the pandemic, but five secondary schools are engaged in the project and have helped to give insight into how the work could progress. It is often the children who struggle in the classroom who benefit most from outdoor learning, which means our initial focus will be to work with teacher-selected cohorts, pupil referral units and special schools to ensure we are offering opportunities to those who need them most.



**Fig. 4** Percentage of schools within the National Forest that had never undertaken outdoor learning (orange), adopted outdoor learning occasionally (yellow) or at least one a month (green). The darker colours representing data prior to 2021 show the actual progress of the CF4L programme. The lighter colours representing post-2021 data are a projection of outcomes based on the goals of the 2019–2024 project

**Case Study: John Taylor Free School (Secondary School)**

John Taylor Free School was grant aided through CF4L to support staff training and capital works to the school grounds. The improvements to the site have meant more pupils can engage in outdoor learning, as well as improving the biodiversity of the site. They've created an outdoor classroom and purchased equipment to ensure sessions are accessible to all. The students currently involved are from the Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) group and are known as the OWL cohort, due to their Outdoor Wild Learning.

**Case Study: Ivanhoe College Middle School**

“We intend to train two staff to run sessions for targeted groups of students based on additional needs (e.g. disengaged learners and SEND students) so that we can offer lessons such as Drama in the Forest and other projects with a nature focus. We are hugely excited by the potential this opportunity offers.”

## 9 Developing the Project into the Future

### Funding

Since long-term sustainability is at the heart of what we are trying to achieve, we have modified our funding model slightly to support this. The new model requires that any school reapplying for funding from the project identifies how they will share their learning and best practice with other schools across the Forest. This could include supporting twilight sessions for teachers from local schools, supporting training at Inset days, or inviting local schools to take part in outdoor learning sessions on their site.

Identifying how schools can support the long-term sustainability of outdoor learning within the Forest will allow for continued learning across a variety of schools, developing a strong supportive and sharing culture. The grant process supports the creation of champion schools, identifying how each applicant can offer support and share their learning. Over time, the increased number of champion schools will support a sustainable network of outdoor learning across the Forest. The grants on offer have also been increased to up to 70% of costs of training and capital improvement work on site.

### Online activity

The pandemic has increased reliance on online support and activity for us all, but three of our champion schools shared their learning on the Forest Foxes project Facebook page, enabling them to share vital learning with other school staff across the Forest and the Leicester city area. One school also joined online resilience training delivered through the Forest Foxes project, enabling them to share learning from their own activities with other schools who are new to delivering outdoor learning.

## 10 Looking Forward: What We have Learnt and Key Objectives for Creating a Forest for Learning

### Networking and Sharing Best Practice

We have learnt that the schools prefer to engage and network at a local level to share and develop their outdoor learning practice, in preference to a central hub.

We could offer opportunities for other schools within the vicinity to take part in our Forest schools programme. We would like to think that we could offer training and CPD opportunities for teachers in the future. *Sarah Rowe (Headteacher) Walton on Trent Primary School*

However, there is still a need for the National Forest to raise awareness of the importance of outdoor learning, celebrate best practice and help signpost teaching staff and volunteers to the support and training they need.

### Harder to Reach Schools

Networking between teachers, schools and professional networks can open up communication with harder to reach schools since word-of-mouth recommendation of CF4L from valued colleagues is very effective in encouraging engagement. These networks can also be beneficial in sharing best practice, experiences, successes and challenges. As well as our Forest Foxes project, we secured funding from the Morrisons' Foundation to work with six schools close to their supermarkets in the towns of Coalville, Swadlincote and Burton upon Trent. Both Forest Foxes and the Morrisons funded work have proved particularly helpful in building relationships with harder to reach primary schools in some of the poorest areas of the Forest.

We also use our wider work and partnerships to help us reach reticent schools. For example, we sent every primary school in the Forest a copy of Robert Macfarlane and Jackie Morris's award-winning book *The Lost Words* (2017), with its stunning illustrations and poetic vocabulary of the natural world. We invited the schools to tell us of the children's reaction when they opened the package (it is a big, beautiful book). The excitement was clear and generated a response from 17 schools. Four of these were new contacts which we followed up with a visit to offer advice on the use of their school grounds.

### **Limited Use of Training for Woodland Owners**

We expected some private woodland owners may have applied for funding to train in risk assessment, drawing up agreements for educational use etc., but the main interest has come from public landowners or other charities (see point 4 below), who already have expertise and policies in place for engaging with the public. When private landowners have been involved, they have appreciated continued facilitation by NFC. However, schools themselves have benefited from woodland management training alongside landowners and it featured as a workshop as part of the Forest Education Network National Conference held in the National Forest in 2019.

### **Limited Development of Woodland Beyond School Grounds**

CF4L has facilitated a few schools in developing relationships with local landowners to use their woodland for regular Forest School activity, such as Forestry England, the Woodland Trust and a few local private woodland owners. Both private and public landowners have valued how CF4L has been able to extend the use and enjoyment of their woodland.

Overall, schools are prioritising establishing outdoor learning spaces on their own grounds for ease of regular use. However, as schools become established in delivering outdoor learning with trained and confident staff it is envisaged that interest in using local woodlands will grow as larger spaces will enhance what the staff can offer and the children can experience.

### **Training**

Face to face training became impossible during the pandemic. However, skills and resources developed at this time of emergency will stand in good stead going forward, as training videos and online platforms will continue to be of use—although there is nothing to beat being out in the woods together!

### **Networking**

Similarly, in person networking was impossible for much of 2020 and 2021. Virtual networks that were established as a matter of need will continue to have their place, as well as social media and digital conferencing helping to engage people and share best practice in a wider arena.

### **Key Objectives up to 2024**

- Embed outdoor learning in all primary schools in the Forest by 2024.
- Better understand current activity, aspirations, barriers and gaps in provision and to establish new activity in 40% of secondary schools.
- Look at gaps in pre-school provision, encouraging the youngest learners to interact with nature.
- Further develop the role of champion host schools, a training programme to provide support for more advanced activities, and refinement of our grant scheme

to ensure it continues to incentivise schools to engage in outdoor learning. At the time of publication, we have made arrangements for our nine Forest Foxes schools to each visit a champion school in the Forest. This will be an exciting opportunity to widen the impact of the work that has been established at ‘exemplar’ schools, but also to share what is important in the work of both participant schools in each encounter.

- To influence our schools and partners to use outdoor learning as a catalyst to embed environmental awareness across the curriculum.
- To create a sustainable framework to support outdoor learning beyond 2024, including a self-sustaining training programme, grant funding embedded within NFC core budget and a well-developed virtual hub to provide advice and support and signpost other services.

## 11 Conclusion

We believe Creating a Forest for Learning has given us a successful model for widening engagement in outdoor learning—both within the National Forest and beyond. Our strategy to build capacity within the schools themselves by funding staff training and capital works in school grounds has proved effective.

In a wider way, the project has taken forward our work in embedding a forest culture throughout this 200 square mile area of the Midlands. The occurrence of the global pandemic during the progress of the work has only bolstered our belief in the value of outdoor learning. The natural world became a solace for so many people, during months when personal human contact was unavailable. The National Forest, with hundreds of woodlands near where people live, felt like it had come into its own—woodlands and green spaces available on people’s doorstep, just when they needed them.

*It is peaceful and magical in the woods. It is amazing listening to all the sounds. Child attending Forest School session*

But as far as specifically young people are concerned, it is increasingly clear that it is important for them to spend time in nature for the sake of their mental wellbeing, their physical health, social skills and academic achievement (Harvey et al., 2020; Otte et al., 2019). Outdoor learning is essential in the National Forest; it is vital to ensure that more children and young people are engaged with nature throughout their learning career and develop crucial understanding and engagement in the National Forest for future generations.

It is essential that young people feel connected to the natural world to fully engage in working positively to help grow the future together. At the National Forest we believe that tackling climate change is urgent, and that sustainability is achievable. We have spent the last 30 years transforming the landscape, using trees and forest to recover from our industrial past. We need to spend the next 25 years mitigating and adapting to climate change to create a greener future that promotes sustainable lifestyles.



We have a strong background story in the National Forest, and examples of young people who grew up in the Forest and are now actively engaged in making this their professional lives too. One young woman delivers Forest School for a day nursery in the Forest and says it was taking part in tree dressing activities with NFC while at primary school that made her certain that one day she would work with trees.

Our aspirations are that:

- generations of children grow up fully aware of the benefits of woodland and able to realise the potential of the Forest for their education, wellbeing, creativity, employment or enterprise.
- pupils, teachers and their families feel a better connection to their local trees and woodlands, understanding the natural world and being empowered to take informed decisions as active citizens helping our responses to Covid-19 and the climate crisis.
- schools will begin to recruit their staff based on an expectation that they will be able to deliver outdoor learning.
- there will be so much outdoor learning delivery across the Forest that teachers changing jobs will simply result in more sharing of skills rather than a loss in overall capacity for outdoor learning.
- parents will select education settings based on the quality and availability of outdoor learning.

Furthermore, we look towards

- Active travel—walking to school through the woods
- Mental health and resilience strengthened through learning outdoors
- Local field trips (instead of boarding coaches to National Parks), with more residential opportunities within the Forest (linking with our wider work to grow sustainable tourism in the National Forest)
- “Generation Forest” will be equipped to change the world!

As was declared in the early days of the Forest in 1994, we want to fulfil the National Forest’s potential to be one of the biggest and most exciting open-air classrooms in the world. Creating a Forest for Learning has set us on this path, and opened up a positive, creative way to engage our young people in truly sustainable living.

### **Recommended further reading**

1. Dr Seuss (1971). *The Lorax*. London: Random House.
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**Caroline Scothern** is Education Officer at the National Forest Company, working to build the capacity of schools to deliver Outdoor Learning in their everyday curriculum. She is passionate about ensuring young people care for and have fun in the woodlands on their doorstep, with all the benefits this offers for their education, health and wellbeing. Caroline is a qualified social worker and experienced teacher and Forest School practitioner. In her spare time, she can often be found walking or cycling on Forest trails.



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