



Our NATIONAL
FOREST



A Forest for Learning



"The evidence for outdoor learning is overwhelming. 93% of schools believe it improves the social skills of pupils, and 85% see a positive impact on behaviour. Outdoor learning builds character, confidence and resilience, which all improve learning."

Natural Connections Demonstration Project
Natural England, 2016

Cover: ©Darren Cresswell
This page: ©Grace Dieu Manor School

Introduction

Education is one of the most powerful tools of change and, in the National Forest, we are all about change.

In just over 25 years, the National Forest Company has led the transformation of 200 square miles of Derbyshire, Leicestershire and Staffordshire, through the planting of 8.7 million trees. In doing so, we have increased forest cover from 6% to nearly 21%, restoring the landscape, reviving the economy and rejuvenating people's lives. But this is only part of the story. To realise the long-term benefits that the National Forest can provide, we want to develop a new woodland culture here; a culture where people better understand the cycle of trees, learn the skills to use and enjoy their local woodlands, and sustain businesses that relate to the Forest. For this to happen, we need to turn to education.

Our work in this area ranges from tree planting with families to forest management with volunteers, from woodland crafts with toddlers to film making with teenagers. Education for all ages and all abilities is central to creating a woodland culture and, we believe, can best be encouraged by starting where everyone can experience it, at school.

Our plan for the National Forest is that every school child will have the opportunity to enjoy outdoor learning in a woodland setting as a regular part of their education. We have already started by creating accessible woodlands, so the next step is to enable all our school children to use these spaces to explore, play and learn. Not only will this help us ensure

the next generation grows up with an understanding of the Forest, but we know it will improve their learning, health and social development too.

It won't be easy, but we believe we should aim high here in the Forest. This report sets out our ambition, starting with our primary schools. We will show how it can be achieved and invite everyone – children and parents, teachers and governors, policy makers and funders – to embrace our vision. We aim to be the first area in the country where outdoor learning is a regular part of every child's education. This will mark another lasting change for the National Forest and one that we believe the rest of the country will want to follow.



©National Forest Company

The national picture

Across the country, there is a growing interest in outdoor learning and the benefits it offers children, but the uptake within primary schools is variable. Curriculum pressures as well as barriers – real or perceived – such as transport, cost, risk or specialist expertise, all mean that outdoor learning is the exception rather than the rule.

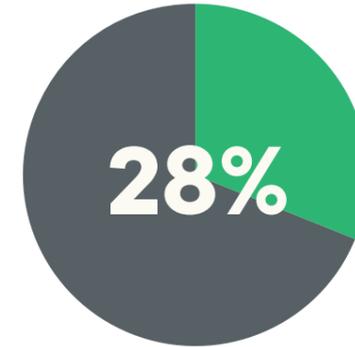
At the same time, the trends in the health of our young people are worrying. 28% of children aged 2 to 15 are overweight or obese, and 10% of our 5 to 15-year-olds suffer from mental health issues.

We know that learning outside the classroom and contact with nature can help address these issues. Indeed, the Government has recognised this with outdoor learning identified as a priority within its 25 Year Environment Plan¹, as part of a wider programme of connecting people with the natural environment.

¹ A Green Future: Our 25 Year Plan to Improve the Environment. HM Government, 2018



©Shaun Flannery Photography



of children aged 2 to 15 are

overweight or obese²



1 in 10 children

mental health problem³

² Obesity and the Food Environment, Public Health England, 2017

³ Children and Young People's Mental Health Coalition Survey, 2017

This national picture is supported by overwhelming evidence for the benefits of outdoor learning, both for improving academic achievement in young people, and nurturing their confidence, resilience and social development. Reports such as the Learning Outside the Classroom Manifesto launched as long ago as 2006⁴, and the more recent 2016 Natural Connections Demonstration Project⁵, both provide compelling evidence that outdoor learning can have a significant and positive impact on children.

Moreover, we know that parents share these concerns. Our recent YouGov research findings⁶ show that only 14% of UK parents believe their child prefers playing outdoors to playing indoors on the internet, but 61% consider their children happier after playing or learning outdoors. The research also found that 78% of all UK parents believe more should be done to ensure that outdoor learning is part of the school curriculum.

What's revealing is that the problem here isn't a failure to understand the issues we face, nor is it a lack of consensus that outdoor learning is part of the solution. The problem is simply in working out how we can make outdoor learning happen, regularly and sustainably.

"The problem is simply in working out how we can make outdoor learning happen, regularly and sustainably."

⁴ Learning Outside the Classroom Manifesto. Department for Education & Skills, 2006

⁵ Natural Connections Demonstration Project. Natural England, 2016

⁶ YouGov. Commissioned by the National Forest Company, 2018



© Steve Baker

A Forest for Learning

More than 500,000 young people have enjoyed environmental education sessions in the National Forest over the last 25 years, with generous funding from partners including Derby-based Rolls-Royce. However, we still face the same problems as the rest of the country for outdoor learning in our primary schools.

In 2016, just under 20% of the 88 primary schools in the Forest were undertaking regular outdoor learning sessions; that is, learning in a wooded setting at least once a month. While some impressive work was being done, when we asked schools what was holding them back, the same barriers cropped up again and again; 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.

Our Forest for Learning approach is designed to address these barriers by focusing on the schools themselves. We believe that every primary school should be able to develop a 'baseline' of outdoor learning provision within the school grounds or within walking distance.

More advanced teaching, in-depth sessions or residential activities can always be provided off-site or by specialist practitioners, but for 'regular' provision (at least once per month) the answer is for this to be provided by the teaching staff themselves, in outdoor spaces on-site, and embedded within the school's ethos.



This approach means that affordable outdoor learning can then be undertaken regularly by primary schools with all their children. It also means it can be used for any lessons – literacy, numeracy or science as much as for particular environmental themes – and can happen all year round, changing with the seasons, weather and conditions.

Image: Teacher training at Woodstone Community Primary School
©Darren Cresswell

The simplicity of this approach means that we can use relatively straightforward activities and modest funding to make a real difference – training teaching staff, creating outdoor learning areas and supporting schools to build their confidence and experience. Resources can be invested in improving school facilities, the expertise of the teaching staff and their commitment to ongoing provision of outdoor learning. Our investment to date has been hundreds rather than thousands of pounds per school per year, and yet even this

amount can have a dramatic impact. The approach will also stimulate more advanced sessions and off-site visits in time, once the schools have developed their expertise and as demand grows.

Importantly, it means we are not having to wait for changes to the National Curriculum, ask busy teachers to find time to include yet more activities, or take resources from other areas of school improvement work. Helping schools to help themselves is a sustainable model.

"The simplicity of this approach means that we can use relatively straightforward activities and modest funding to make a real difference"

How it works

Since 2016, we have already more than doubled the number of primary schools engaged in regular outdoor learning from 15 to 36 of our 88 schools. That's an increase from just under 20% to more than 40% of schools, demonstrating the appetite for this approach and the speed at which it can be taken up. Others have increased their skills and knowledge, moving from sporadic to frequent activity, and schools with no known activity have reduced from 31% to just 8%.

We are:

- Talking to schools to understand their current outdoor learning provision, barriers and aspirations
- Providing grants for teacher training and arranging Forest School training sessions
- Providing small grants to create and manage outdoor learning areas within the school grounds or in local woodlands within walking distance
- Mapping schools and woodlands in the Forest to identify gaps, and match up needs and opportunities
- Supporting schools to embed outdoor learning into their school improvement plans and leadership
- Facilitating a specialist network of outdoor learning professionals for advice



Above: ©Darren Cresswell

Case study: Ibstock Junior School

The school previously offered no outdoor learning activity but has trained three teaching staff and now undertakes regular sessions with a 'nurture' group of pupils to provide additional learning and behavioural support.

"The Forest School we have set up and the resources we have acquired have started to have a real and positive impact. Without the funding it is unlikely we would have been able to achieve any of this."

Deputy Head Teacher

Case study: Netherseal Primary School

The school has no usable greenspace within their grounds, but has been linked with a nearby woodland which was created 12 years ago using a National Forest grant. Children as young as four and five years old can now walk to the site to enjoy regular outdoor learning sessions with their teacher who was trained through the project.

"It is peaceful and magical in [the] woods. It is amazing listening to all the sounds."

Child from Netherseal Primary attending Forest School session.

Below: ©Darren Cresswell



Case study: Newhall Community Junior School

The school has used the project to improve their school grounds and train teaching staff, embedding their commitment to outdoor learning within the school improvement plan.

"The children really do benefit from the outdoor learning environment and it really does have a positive impact on their emotional well-being and mental health."

Assistant Head Teacher.



The Lost Words

All 88 primary schools have been given a copy of Robert Macfarlane and Jackie Morris's award-winning book, *The Lost Words*, with its stunning illustrations and poetic vocabulary of the natural world.

"This book will bring the outside in and also explore parts of nature we may not see in our wooded area."

Teacher,
Woodcote Primary School.

Left: ©Jackie Morris

Timber festival

Our outdoor learning work was celebrated at Timber festival, here in the National Forest, with a forest monsters competition involving 300 school children. Their drawings came to life as part of a gallery of monsters and forest creatures in a woodland glade.



Right ©National Forest Company

Our ambition

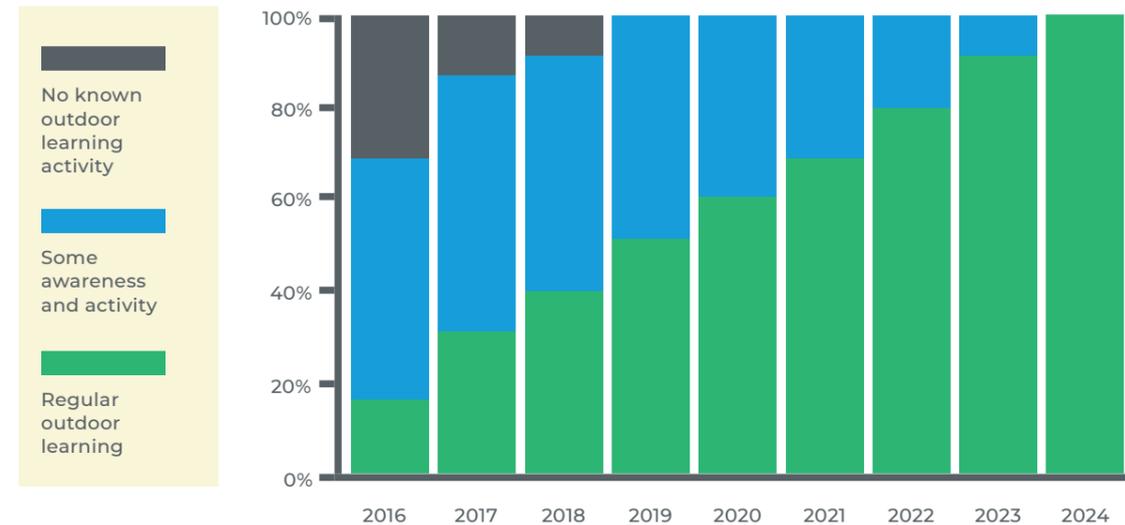
Following our rapid progress to date, we are aiming to achieve regular outdoor learning (at least once per month) in 50% of primary schools by 2019. Beyond this, the National Forest Company's ambition is to embed outdoor learning in 100% of primary schools in the Forest over the next five years.

As we do so, we'll create demonstration schools, work with school leaders and governors to champion outdoor learning, build management of outdoor wooded areas into maintenance plans and highlight our impact through monitoring and evaluation. We also recognise that education does not stop at primary schools. We will develop new programmes for secondary schools based on the increased confidence and well-being 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.

Our ambition is summarised in our five point plan for outdoor learning in the National Forest. We are now asking all schools to join us, parents to support us, funders to invest in our vision, and partners to engage. Ultimately, it is our children who will reap the benefits.

But it doesn't stop there. We firmly believe the five point plan can 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, well-being and the environment.



"We are now asking all schools to join us, parents to support us, funders to invest in our vision, and partners to engage."

This page ©National Forest Company
Back cover: ©Diana Jarvis

Outdoor learning five point plan

We will 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 supported network of outdoor learning professionals and high quality off-site outdoor learning provision

Find out more and see our feature on Woodstone Community Primary School nationalforest.org/creating-a-forest-for-learning

"The Forest for Learning project is well thought out, visionary and very much an exemplar for the rest of the UK. With the many challenges schools face to get children outdoors, this is what is so needed."

Sylva Foundation



THE NATIONAL
FOREST

This work is kindly supported by the Audemars Piguet Foundation and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.

The paper used for this publication is an FSC certified product

Registered Charity Number 1166563 ©National Forest Company 2018

nationalforest.org

