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Wales**

A guide to Forest School in Wales



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// Forest School: A hands-on approach to learning

Forest School is an inspirational process that offers children, young people and adults, regular opportunities to achieve, and develop self-confidence through hands on learning experiences in a local woodland environment. Forest School sessions are held in a woodland-based learning environment that is complementary, not separate, to learning in a traditional classroom or school grounds environment.

Sessions are not timetable or workbook led but driven by the learners themselves, drawing on their interests and imagination. Through carefully structured sessions with supportive intervention by qualified leaders, Forest School can bring learning to life in a real and tangible context.



// Forest School...
driven by the learners
themselves, drawing
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and imagination

// Essential Elements



The **3 essential elements** that make a **'Forest School'** a **Forest School**

1. Use of a local woodland or 'wooded' setting

Learners visit the same local woodland over a prolonged period of time, establishing a special relationship with the site, as they witness at first hand, the transformation through the seasons.

As reports inform us that learners are becoming disconnected from the natural environment, Forest School offers learners the opportunity to reconnect with nature in a magical and stimulating way.

2. A qualified leader

Forest School is run by a qualified Level 3 (either BTEC or Agored Cymru) Forest School Leader, who is DBS checked and First Aid qualified. Leaders come from a range of backgrounds including woodland owners, teachers, craftspeople, early-years specialists and youth or play workers. To qualify, leaders go through a rigorous training course that equips them with both the practical and theoretical knowledge to run Forest School sessions. Responsible for compiling ecological impact assessments and risk assessments of the Forest School site and activities, the Forest School leader is also responsible for ensuring child protection and health and safety procedures are adhered to. If you are approached by anyone offering Forest School delivery they should be able to show you the relevant certificates of competence.



// Enabling leaders to build trusting relationships with the learners

3. Regular visits

Regular weekly visits to the same woodland over an extended period of time (aiming for a minimum of ten weeks to a complete year), allows learners the time and freedom to explore independently at their own pace. As they become familiar with the Forest School site a sense of ownership and ease in the woodland environment develops, learners become excited about revisiting 'their' woodland.

Due to the recurring nature of the visits, tasks of increasing complexity and skill can be introduced week on week, such as, using hand tools and fire lighting, to facilitate participants learning whilst giving them the opportunity to revisit and continue with tasks commenced the week before. Repeated visits also enable leaders to build trusting relationships with the learners and they get to know each child's needs and interests.

// Opportunity to take risks



// Enabling learners to explore and discover independently whilst making informed decisions

Forest School provides the opportunity to take risks

The learner's safety and welfare is a priority at Forest School. Rules are jointly set and agreed by the leaders and learners alike to manage and minimise risk. Routinely revisited during every session, learners learn to recognise risk, why the rules are necessary and learn how to be safe in the outdoor environment. In time, they begin subconsciously to risk assess their actions for themselves, enabling them to explore and discover independently whilst making informed decisions about how to deal with unfamiliar situations and challenges, such as, tree climbing, using tools and splashing in puddles.

High adult to learner ratios ensure that learners can stretch the boundaries of their learning and enable them to take risks that would not be possible in school, for example, toasting a marshmallow on a woodland fire. Smaller group sizes also mean learners have the time and support to try and master more complicated tasks, such as, knot tying and whistle making with adults on standby to help and encourage if needs be. In such a setting there is less fear of failing as there is always time to have another go or refine. These tasks and managed risks then introduce the benefits to risk taking to both adults and students alike.

Sessions are held in all weathers, except very extreme and/or windy weather. Over time this can lead to a greater physical and mental resilience to being outdoors in any weather.

// Benefits and Research

Much research has been carried out to ascertain, what the benefits of attending Forest School are. Traditionally, research has found Forest School to be particularly beneficial to disaffected teenagers and learners that struggle in the formal classroom learning environment. More recent research has also indicated that attending Forest School can have significant benefits for all learners at any stage of development, and on levels of health and physical well-being.

During 2006, a 14-week Forest School programme was run by a Forestry Commission Wales (Natural Resources Wales - NRW), Education Officer, involving two classes from Ysgol Pentre, a small village primary school in Pentre, near Chirk, North Wales. Using the model proposed by the New Economics Foundation (nef) / Forest Research, a storyboard exercise was undertaken to establish the propositions and underlying hypothesis for Forest School:

These were:

- Increased self-esteem and self-confidence
- Improved social skills
- The development of language and communication skills
- Improved physical motor skills
- Improved motivation and concentration
- Increased knowledge and understanding of the environment
- New perspectives for the teachers, leaders, learners and parents involved in Forest School



To gather evidence, samples of learners from each class were observed during the Forest School sessions. To track whether or not the observed behaviour that was being displayed supported the propositions, the sample learners' conduct was tracked weekly by the leaders and teachers using data recording templates.

All the participating learners completed Forest School diaries and their parents were also asked to complete two evaluation forms during the course of the programme. Once the programme had come to a close, informal review workshops loosely based on the highs and lows section of the evaluation poster described in the nef report, were held with the learners, teachers and classroom assistants.

Having gathered and analysed the information from all involved, it was clear that substantive observed behavioural changes against each of the stated propositions had occurred.



// Benefits and Research

Improve self-esteem and self-confidence

Characterised by the willingness to try something new and feeling pleased and showing pride with personal achievement. Noticeable increases in self-confidence were displayed in many learners during the programme. Pupils were observed tackling new tasks without assistance and talking to new visitors, particularly the pupils who were more timid and withdrawn in school.

Teacher writing about a Year 1 boy on a baseline assessment before Forest School:

'Tends to be either on a high or on a low. Sensitive little boy. Often appears to not be listening but really he is. Slowly growing in confidence.'

Teacher writing about the same pupil on an End of Programme Assessment:

'Still up and down but in school much more confident in all areas. Concentration and self-belief lots better.'

Improve social skills

Characterised by an increased awareness of the consequences of actions on other people, the acquired ability to undertake activities with others either by sharing tools and tasks, or by taking part in co-operative play. Teachers and Leaders noticed strong teamwork developing and teachers commented that successful partnerships were formed in Forest School between pupils who had not previously been able to work successfully together in the classroom. Some of the learners also noticed improvements in their own behaviour. The Forest School diaries included the question, 'Is there anything you are better at now you have been to Forest School?', a Year 2 pupil with ADHD wrote, 'working as a group' (spelling adjusted) meanwhile a Year 1 pupil wrote, 'being sensible'.

Contribute to the development of language and communication skills

Characterised by the development of more sophisticated uses of both written and spoken language that is prompted by the visual and other sensory experiences of a child taking part in Forest

School. Many pupils were quiet and reserved with the unfamiliar adults during the early weeks. Gradually, as the programme progressed, these learners were observed willingly sharing ideas and explaining to visiting adults about the Forest School rules.

'When out walking with the family along the canal he often talks about what is safe and what is not', one parent commented.

Improve physical motor skills

Characterised by the development of physical stamina and the development of gross motor skills

- the physical skills and co-ordination allowing the free and easy movement around the Forest School site, as well as the development of fine motor skills
- the effective use of tools and the ability to make structures and objects, for example, shelters, dens or creative art projects. There was a degree of improvement in many of the learners. After needing help during the first few weeks climbing steps and getting over the stile, they soon got used to the physical challenges that the Forest School site imposed and with encouragement, relished tackling these head on.

One 7-Year-old pupil, due to her build, struggled at first with the distance to be walked and was constantly falling over in the slippery conditions. She noticeably gained in stamina and physical skills as the sessions progressed. With a helping hand she had practised balancing along a fallen tree and a log bench during the later weeks. She was extremely pleased with herself when, on the last day, she walked along both trunks unaided, with an adult close by for reassurance.



// Benefits and Research

Improve motivation and concentration

Characterised by keenness to participate in exploratory, learning and play activities, as well as an ability to focus on specific tasks and to concentrate for extended periods of time. A number of the learners were already highly motivated at the beginning of the project, eager to participate in everything and very responsive to questions. From the perspective of concentration, great improvements were observed. Learners who had been described as having low concentration levels were observed focussing for long periods of time, making elder jewellery and looking for mini-beasts. The less formal, more practical situation suited them.

A nursery pupil who had a concentration problem in class, tended to wander off and do what she wanted rather than keeping on task during the first few weeks. Leader evaluations often commented that she was in a world of her own during those early sessions and staff had to keep a careful eye on her.

Her teacher commented in her reflective diary after session one in the woods:

'The only one who went out of the boundaries.'

However, slowly, she began to mix a little better and her concentration levels grew.

'So pleased with her this week! Participated with tasks (for short periods) with enthusiasm (and support), liked mini-beast hunt. When not supported by an adult, did wander around on her own but happy!'

Teacher's comment, session 3.

'Approached Ffion today to ask if she could help her make musical instrument. A big improvement, shows a willingness to join in for the first time ever!'

Teacher's comment, session 5.

Contribute to learners' knowledge and understanding of the environment

Characterised by a respect for the environment and an interest in their natural surroundings; making observations and insights into natural phenomena such as seasonal change and the ability to identify



different species of flora and fauna. A major area of improvement with leaders, teachers and parents frequently commenting on the increased level of environmental awareness and interest in wildlife. As the weeks progressed, learners could be heard chatting amongst each other about how nice the smell of the wild garlic was and discussing how the sun had dried up the puddles because it was summertime.

'She has learnt the names of some plants and points them out to me on walks. She also talks about animals that live in the woods,' parental comment.

New perspectives for teachers, leaders, parents and learners

Characterised by a different relationship developing between learners and teachers as they see one another in a different setting, coping with shared challenges, and increased parental interest in and positive attitude towards Forest School. As the teachers were in a support role rather than actually delivering the programme, it gave them a valuable opportunity to observe the learners taking part in their activities. Parental comments indicate that many of the learners were sufficiently enthused about their Forest School experience that they took it back into their home lives, taking their parents on the weekends to see what they had been doing that week at Forest School.

'I really enjoyed seeing the learners in a different environment. I saw another side of them - fantastic!'

Teacher commenting after session 1.

// Benefits and Research



A copy of the Pentre Forest School Evaluation project can be downloaded from our website at www.naturalresourceswales.gov.uk

These findings were backed up during a further study from September 2009 to July 2010 when Year 3 children from Ysgol Llanfair, near Ruthin in Denbighshire attended a Forest School in a local woodland. An added dimension to this study was that the majority of sessions were delivered through the medium of Welsh with the aim of improving the overall use of the language both at Forest School and back in the classroom.

A second year-long study began in September 2010 in conjunction with University of Wales Institute, Cardiff (Cardiff Metropolitan University), which explored observing the children and their Forest School experiences, paying particular attention to their involvement and motivation. The team hoped that this work could add to the growing evidence base of Forest School practice and may provide ideas and recommendations to others hoping to run extended Forest School programmes.

The following year, October 2011 – June 2012 a further long term programme was led by NRW Education Officers. Syr John Rhys is a very small community school near to Bwlch Nant yr Arian, an NRW Visitor Centre. A mixed year group of 13 children - 7-11 years of age was chosen, as often the local children miss out on many opportunities to learn in the outdoors. Despite the rural setting the children came from a variety of backgrounds.

The main aim of this programme was to nurture confidence in all 13 of the children and develop mentoring roles between the children in the class. Team based investigations and workshops in the outdoors encouraged the children to work together. Confidence quickly improved as the children developed new skills, and a sense of ownership of the Forest School area over the course of the programme.

// Forest School Programme

A typical Forest School programme

- A typical programme involves the Level 3 qualified Forest School Leader initially talking to the learners, teachers, parents and guardians. The Leader will explain what Forest School is and will discuss what sort of activities the participants will be doing and what the learners' needs are.
- An appropriate local woodland site is found and an Environmental Impact Assessment completed to ensure that the site will not be irreparably damaged by the running of sessions. If suitable, the landowner's permission to use the site is gained and insurance issues sorted.
- Before sessions begin, a site risk assessment is compiled by the qualified leader to ensure the site is safe for the learners and adults to visit.
- Prior to taking them out to the woodland, the Forest School Leader will get to know the participants and gain their confidence by leading activities at their educational setting for one or two sessions.
- Under the supervision of the qualified leader, the group visit the same local woodland site on a regular basis, ideally throughout the year but not less than a minimum of ten weeks, except in extreme conditions. The qualified leader will risk assess the planned activities for each session and will check the woodland site before the learners arrive, for any change which may have occurred since the last session.



- Each session is learner-centred, based on the skills and needs of that group.
- Games are played and small achievable tasks are set, such as hide and seek, building shelters and woodland art activities. Free playtime is factored into sessions and as participants get used to the Forest School routine and the leaders' trust in them grows. Tool use, fire lighting and cooking are gradually introduced alongside strict safety procedures. Over time as the learners become more familiar and confident, not only do they learn how to use tools appropriately and safely but such activities can also promote trust and raise self-confidence.
- Using natural materials the participants develop both practical and intellectual skills, which can be linked with the National Curriculum and the Foundation Phase.
- To mark participants' journey of development and to celebrate their achievements, the final Forest School session is usually marked with a celebratory event which parents and other individuals involved in the programme are invited to attend.



// Forest School Leader



Level 1 – Award in Outdoor Learning

Training is available as an introduction to Outdoor Learning – it does not qualify participants to lead or assist Forest School sessions. If all 3 units are completed students gain an Award in Outdoor Learning. This would then equip students to progress to Level 2 and 3 Forest School training. However, depending on the interests of students each unit can be completed independently. There are a total of 5 credits on offer at this level.

There are 3 units at Level 1 available to students from the age of 14.

- Learning, play and development in the outdoors – 1 credit
- Outdoor Practical Skills – 2 credits
- Health and safety in the Outdoors – 1 credit

Level 2 – Award in Assisting Forest School

The training is shorter, and designed for people with less previous experience of working with learners and young people, or those who only want to work as a Forest School Assistant – it does not qualify participants to lead Forest School sessions.

The qualification to assist at Forest School includes:

Mandatory Units

- Supporting Learning, Play and Development in the outdoors
- Sustainable use of Natural Resources
- Outdoor Practical Skills
- Assist at Forest School

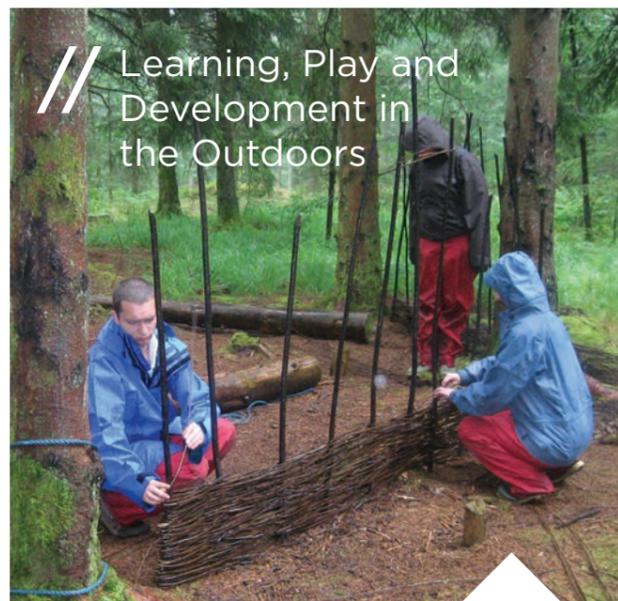
To gain the Level 2 Forest School qualification at Award Level, trainees will need to achieve 10 credits by completing the mandatory units. The course will involve approximately 50 guided learning hours and an average of 30 hours of independent work.

How to become a Forest School Leader

To become involved in Forest School delivery it is important to undertake the necessary training.

In Wales, to be able to lead and deliver Forest School sessions an individual must have:

- An Agored Cymru Level 3 Forest School Practitioner Award or BTEC Forest School Leader qualification. From 2015 students need to complete and achieve the Outdoor Learning Qualification at Certificate level, specialising as a Forest School Leader.
- A current First Aid at Work or First Aid in the Outdoors certificate
- An enhanced DBS disclosure



// Learning, Play and Development in the Outdoors

// Forest School Leader



The Forest School leader qualification is designed for people in Wales with a background in education, youth/play work or similar that wish to qualify to run Forest School programmes for their client group.

In Wales, the new Level 3 is accredited by the Agored Cymru Outdoor Learning Qualification, developed by the Wales Outdoor Learning Training Network.

The qualification to lead Forest School programmes includes:

Mandatory Units

- Supporting Learning, Play and Development in the Outdoors
- Sustainable Use of Natural Resources
- Observation and Evaluation of Outdoor Learning
- Teach Outdoor Practical Skills
- Forest School Leader

The course involves approximately 60 guided learning hours and an average of 90 hours of independent work.

This includes independent research, and the planning and delivery of a Forest School programme with a group of designated learners for a minimum of six weeks.

To gain the Forest School Leader Certificate, trainees will need to achieve 15 credits using the Outdoor Learning Qualification, which will include passing an observation assessment leading a Forest School session.

Please note – the Level 3 course is demanding and time consuming and should not be undertaken without serious deliberation.

Natural Resources Wales would recommend that anyone wishing to enlist on a course take part in a Forest School session, by visiting a setting running Forest School programmes, before committing to starting the training.

For further information about Outdoor Learning training please contact:

Tel: 0300 065 3000

Email: education@naturalresourceswales.gov.uk

// Forest School History

What is the **history** of **Forest School** in the **UK** and **Wales**?

In 1993 a group of Early Years students from Bridgwater College, Somerset, visited Denmark and witnessed the benefits of Forest School for themselves. Once back in the UK the lecturers that worked with the students considered how they could apply what they had seen to the childcare provision in their own Early Years Excellence Centre, and set about establishing a Forest School site within the college grounds. In 2000 the college received the Queens Anniversary Prize for Higher and Further education in recognition of its pioneering work.

Since then the concept has been spreading throughout Britain. The first Forest School Leader training course to be held in Wales was run in South Wales during 2000, with participants going on to develop Forest School within their local area. Having bought in expertise from Bridgwater College to run courses for the first year, in 2002 members of Forestry Commission Wales (NRW), and Welsh College lecturers set about writing training modules specific to Wales. In 2003 OCN Wales (Agored Cymru), ratified these Level 3 modules and further courses were run with OCN Level 1 and 2 Courses being introduced in 2004.

2004 proved to be an important year from the perspective of research into Forest School. Following on from research carried out at Forest School settings in Newport and Flintshire, 2004 witnessed the publication of the New Economics Foundation's report into the impact of Forest School. The report also developed a model for Forest School leaders to evaluate their sessions, which continues to be used by leaders today.

In 2007, to support training, Forestry Commission Wales (NRW) produced a film called '**Forest School in Wales**'. This DVD showcased ten very different Forest School programmes that celebrated good practice. Clips from this film are available on the NRW website.

During 2008 a project trained four Foundation Phase Forest School leaders to become Forest School leader trainers in South Wales. This was followed up in 2010 with a further four trainers going through a pilot Level 4 Forest School Trainers course, which has resulted in securing Forest School and Outdoor Learning training in the private sector in Wales.

In 2010 the "**10 Years of Forest School in Wales**" conference was held as a milestone event, giving practitioners the opportunity to celebrate what had gone before and influence the direction in which Wales takes Forest School in the next 10 years.

With more and more Forest School training courses being run in Wales by different providers, during 2006 the OCN Wales Forest School Training Network was established to ensure a common standard of quality training in Wales. Bringing together all the existing Forest School trainers in Wales the network enables trainers to work together to improve the quality and consistency of training. The Forest School OCN units were reviewed by the new network and agreed with a new format and credit values. They were reviewed and small changes made in 2010 with pilots running later that year. In 2015 the Training Network became the Outdoor Learning Training Network as it started to use a new suite of Agored Cymru units that lead to Outdoor Learning qualifications for those wanting to lead groups in Forest School, Coastal School and Outdoor Learning/Play Programmes.

Between 2011 and 2015 training capacity in Wales has enabled more people to become Forest School Leaders and seen independent trainers explore other ways of encouraging education professionals to use the outdoors for learning, by developing new training units.

Further training courses will continue to be run with training being constantly reviewed and refined by the Wales Training Network in conjunction with our GB colleagues, resulting in a steady increase in the number of practising Forest School Leaders. There is already change on the way with much more diversity of training on offer to those who are inspired to take groups into the outdoors to learn and grow.



// Research

Forest School **Research**

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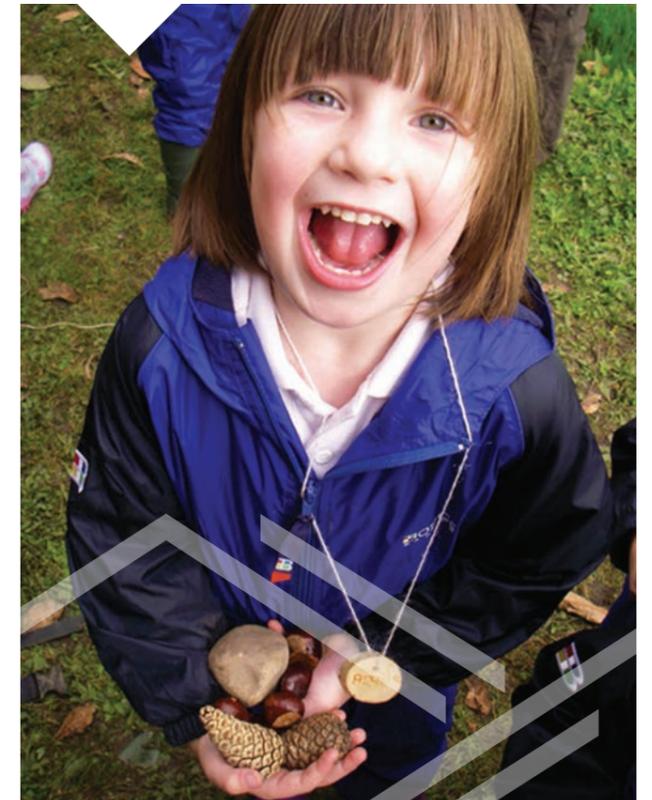
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Pavey, B. 2005 'The Forest School and Inclusion: a project evaluation' www.leeds.ac.uk/educol/documents/161165.htm

Swarbrick, N., Eastwood, G. and Tutton, K. 2004 'Self-esteem and successful interaction as part of the forest school project', Support for Learning 19(3): 142-146 bldss.bl.uk/BLDSS/#/New Order/0

The paper below is an experimental study of the benefits to children's physical and motor skills from playing in a forest environment

Fjørtoft, I. 2001 'The Natural Environment as a Playground for Children: The Impact of Outdoor Play Activities in Pre-Primary School Children', Early Childhood Education Journal 29(2): 111-117 proceedings.esri.com/library/userconf/proc00/professional/papers/PAP462/p462.htm

// Natural Resources Wales and Forest School

Natural Resources Wales (NRW) supports the Wales Outdoor Learning Training Network and runs a limited number of training events each year depending on demand. Each NRW Education Officer is a qualified Forest School Leader or are in the process of training. NRW works in partnership with the private sector to maximise training capacity within Wales. All of the photos that appear in this report are from Forest School sessions that have been run in Wales.

Useful websites

Outdoor Learning Wales Network
www.outdoorlearningwales.org/home

Outdoor Learning Wales (OLW) is a national network that aims to increase the understanding, appreciation and sustainable use of Wales' natural environment.

You can get this publication in large print and other forms (e.g. Braille, Audiotape) by contacting NRW at the phone number or email address below:

Natural Resources Wales

Tel: 0300 065 3000

Email: education@naturalresourceswales.gov.uk

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