



Bringing children closer to nature



Report of a survey on Forest School and outdoor learning in England
June 2019



SYLVA
FOUNDATION



1,171

RESPONDENTS TOOK PART:

- 51% school educators
- 41% non-school educators
- 8% woodland owners

FUNDING

Teaching budget most important in supporting Forest School

Parental contributions significant except in deprived schools

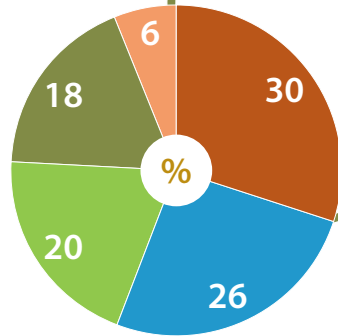
Lack of funding is the greatest barrier to establishing & sustaining Forest Schools

Funding for **Clothing and Equipment** most needed

Long-term grants the most desired funding type

TYPES OF OUTDOOR ACTIVITIES

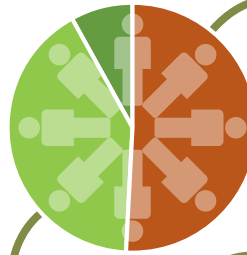
- 30% Forest School
- 26% Outdoor learning
- 20% One-day visits
- 18% Residential
- 6% Other activities



INFORMATION

3/4 of woodland owners would welcome an **online platform** to support more outdoor learning activities

Lack of information is the largest barrier to woodland owners in providing a Forest School site



CURRICULUM AND PRIORITIES



FOREST SCHOOL PROVISION IN SCHOOLS:

- 54% Early Years and Key Stage 1
- 40% Key Stage 2
- 6% Key Stages 3-5

KEY PRIORITIES:

Non-school educators: making **outdoor learning** a statutory requirement

School educators: encouraging senior school management to adopt **Forest School**

2/3 of Non-school educators have free access to a Forest School site

85% of schools use a site on school grounds for Forest School

Privately-owned land supports 45% of outdoor learning provided by Non-school educators

Of schools which travel to a Forest School site, 60% travel one mile or less

2/3 of Forest School sites have a management plan



WOODLAND SITES

QUALIFICATION AND TRAINING

Highest ranked **needs** for managing a Forest School site were:

Tree Health Tree Safety

Training most desired by School educators was:

Woodwork Measuring Impact Wellbeing

Bringing children closer to nature

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We are indebted to the respondents who so diligently gave their time to respond to the survey. For advice and support we thank Emily Crawley, Gareth Davies, Jo Phillips, Sara Collins, Sarah Lawfull, Simon Gould, and Victoria Edwards.

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Executive summary

A public online survey, called *Bringing Children Closer to Nature*, was run in late 2018 and promoted to educational practitioners, both *School* and *Non-school*, and also to *Woodland owners*. The aims were to present a snapshot of the current status of Forest School practice and outdoor learning in wooded areas and forests, and to specifically gather much needed evidence concerning barriers and opportunities to establishing and sustaining Forest School practice.

The survey attracted 1,171 respondents, mostly from England. The majority, 51%, were *School educators*, while 41% were *Non-school educators*, and 8% *Woodland owners*. One-third of school respondents said they practiced Forest School, with slightly fewer practicing some other form of learning outside the classroom, with a small number practicing both. There was a low proportion of respondents from deprived schools.

For Forest School practice specifically, the majority (54%) is taking place in Early Years and Key Stage 1 (infants primary school), and 40% in Key Stage 2 (juniors primary school). In contrast, 6% of respondents provided Forest School for Key Stages 3-5 (secondary schools). The majority of Forest School provision within schools was undertaken by school staff, supported occasionally by external providers.

Both *School* and *Non-school educators* emphasised the importance of building regular, long-term connections between children and the natural world, with weekly Forest School sessions for the whole academic year the most common frequency.

Most schools had established Forest School, or other outdoor learning sites, within their school grounds. *Non-school educators* were most likely to require transport for pupils to woodland sites away from schools. A high proportion of respondents had woodland management plans in place for their Forest School site.

Educators (*School* and *Non-school*) did not believe that lack of information was a barrier to setting up a Forest School. The need for information about Forest School and associated risks and liabilities were strongly expressed by *Woodland owners*.

School budgets were the most important source of funds supporting Forest School and outdoor learning, and lack of funding was the greatest barrier

experienced by schools. Parental contributions were a significant source of funds among less-deprived schools, but least important among deprived schools.

Finding time for Forest School sessions in the school timetable and curriculum was a significant barrier, with the support of governors and senior management often cited as being crucial. *Non-school educators* considered that outdoor learning becoming a statutory requirement was a more significant priority than grant provision. If funding were made available, the preferred priority among *School educators* was the purchase of clothing and equipment and long-term grants over several years to sustain practice. *Non-school educators* were in favour of *pro bono* support in the form of advice, resources and training from the forestry and arboricultural sectors. Tree health and tree safety were ranked highly among all educators as topics for training in site management. Wellbeing of young people was one of several training needs considered important by *School educators* for delivery of outdoor learning.

Key recommendations arising from the survey are:

- I. **Schools** with successful Forest School and/or outdoor learning should be advocates and share experience with schools that do not have Forest School and outdoor learning programmes.
- II. **Government** should consider the significant societal and financial benefits arising from embedding the provision of outdoor learning in the curriculum.
- III. The **outdoor learning sector** should be proactive in advancing further the school curriculum by working closely with government.
- IV. The **forestry and arboricultural sector** should explore how best to support educators in providing tree and site management advice.
- V. **New grant schemes** should be designed and tested that would help overcome barriers to outdoor learning, and support sought from grant providers.
- VI. **A new online platform** could be designed to support outdoor learning among practitioners and woodland owners, and funding sought for its delivery.
- VII. **Further research** should be commissioned to increase understanding of the needs of deprived schools, and how barriers may be overcome.

Introduction

Enabling children to be closer to nature, especially by learning and exploring in wooded areas and forests, was recognised as a key action in the government's 25-year Environment Planⁱ, published in 2018.

Yet despite the well-proven holistic benefits of children spending regular time outdoors such as improved health and wellbeing, increase in motivation for learning, and environmental awareness, there has been a lack of information about the practical barriers and opportunities of providing outdoor learning for young people across England, particularly in wooded areas and forests^{ii, iii, iv}.



However, some organisations have started to use surveys of Forest School and outdoor learning to inform their strategy and guide projects, such as The National Forest's *Creating a Forest for Learning* programme with a five-point plan for outdoor learning for all the schools within the National Forest area^v.

A public online survey, called *Bringing Children Closer to Nature*, was run in late 2018 and promoted to practitioners to gather much-needed evidence concerning barriers and opportunities to Forest School practice and outdoor learning in wooded areas and forests, and to quantify any issues regarding establishing and sustaining of Forest Schools.



The three main aims of the survey were:

1. Gathering basic information: including the number and distribution of schools and other organisations who practice Forest School or outdoor learning in woodland and forests, and the levels of training and skills among practitioners;

2. Understanding more about barriers and opportunities to establishing and sustaining regular contact with woodlands for children including via Forest School, and how these could be overcome/supported in each of these areas:

- i. Woodland sites
- ii. Information
- iii. Funding
- iv. Curriculum and priorities
- v. Qualifications and training

3. Exploring potential interest among woodland owners in providing greater access to woodland sites to support Forest School and outdoor learning, and to understand any barriers woodland owners may face.

The national survey was undertaken as a key evidence gathering activity to support and guide the activities of the *Forest Schools for All* project, an initiative between Sylva Foundation, The Ernest Cook Trust (funder), and The Forest School Association (partner).

Survey method

The survey questions were co-developed with project partners during autumn 2018. The survey was promoted as the *Bringing Children Closer to Nature survey*, and was open to participants for a period of eight weeks (November 2018 – January 2019).

The stated geographic focus for the survey was England, although responses from the whole of the UK were clearly invited in the introduction to the survey. The aim was to provide an indication that similar surveys are needed in devolved countries of Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Wales. Delivering these was beyond the scope of this survey.

People were invited to participate in a structured online survey, built in LimeSurvey, an open-source survey tool (www.limesurvey.org). It was designed to operate on desktop computers as well as mobile devices such as phones and tablets. It was hosted online by Sylva Foundation at www.sylva.org.uk/survey. The great strength of an online survey is that it is a method of gathering a large amount of information from a large number of people without incurring the sort of costs that other forms of social research (focus groups, one-to-one interviews, and telephone or postal questionnaires) entail. However, the authors are aware that the responses reported reflect only the views of those who participated in the survey online, and that there are well-documented reasons why there may be a bias towards respondents who feel particularly strongly in favour of the survey topic, or, indeed, have strong views to the contrary. The survey was well publicised to attract the widest possible response, but inevitably, those who were made aware of it were to some extent already engaged with outdoor learning and Forest School. We have been careful not to extrapolate our findings to the whole community of educational providers. As with all surveys, individual interpretation of questions can vary among respondents, as can strength of agreement with statements offered using Likert scales^{vi}. In the analysis we have been careful not to make assumptions about these points. In addition, we recognise that the survey was only available to those willing and able to work online. Taking account of strengths and limitations, we are confident that our research method was robust enough to sustain the analyses and discussion in this report.

The survey consisted of 169 questions in total, organised within three main sections, with the number presented to respondents dependent the survey routing (*i.e.* likely exposure 20-40 questions). A copy of the full set of questions is available at: www.sylva.org.uk/forestschoools.

Data analyses

Where possible counts and percentages of respondents are included in this report. It should be noted any such data will relate to the specific question answered, not to the overall survey count because most questions were presented as optional, therefore the *n* for every question will vary.

Many questions were multiple choice and this also affects the interpretation of *n* for the umbrella question. We have clarified where this may otherwise be ambiguous. We have not attempted to provide detailed statistical analysis of all possible correlations: the survey is a snap-shot in time for a group who chose to respond to the survey; we have been careful not to extrapolate from these indicative results, which are necessarily skewed in favour of people who actively engage in outdoor learning and Forest School.

While the focus of this report is sustaining Forest School, we did attract responses from schools who engage with outdoor learning, but do not provide Forest School. In order to determine whether we could aggregate data from this group with the majority of responders who do provide Forest School for our broader questions that were not directly related to delivery of Forest School *per se*, we compared responses to a subset of questions. We analysed three questions: views of benefits (or otherwise) of outdoor learning, academic achievement of the school, and a measure of social deprivation (number of children receiving pupil premium). We found no systematic differences between the two groups that make aggregating the results problematic.

Open responses in the form of comments were used to add richness to the text; we have not undertaken qualitative narrative analysis.

Target respondents

The survey was intended for those people working in education or who were landowners, with a geographic emphasis on England. Respondents were asked to self-identify with their main role, which determined the section of questions that they were presented:

Section 1 – Personal data and information allowing categorisation of three main respondent types (to allow routing through Section 2 and/or Section 3)

AND

Section 2 – Educators: questions relating to two respondent categories

A. School educator: salaried member of staff including Early Years Foundation Stage settings. Those considering themselves part of a school staff community, for example who have a line manager at a school

B. Non-school educator: an educator not employed as school staff but working as an external provider, or employed by another type of organisation, or a home educator

AND / OR

Section 3 – Woodland owner: a landowner owning or managing woodland in the UK. This section could be completed in addition to either Section 2A or 2B.

The specific stakeholders targeted for the survey were:

*Parents/guardians
Teachers
Head Teachers
Governors*

*Outdoor learning providers
Voluntary organisations
Charities
Woodland owners*

Main themes explored

When developing the survey, the aims of the *Forest Schools for All* project were used to help design the questions. Additional questions were included to ensure a full picture could be gained of respondents' views, values and experiences.

Motivation for Forest School practice or outdoor learning in woodlands:

- > In what ways is outdoor learning as a concept considered valuable among respondents?
- > Is Forest School practice in particular effective in achieving desired outcomes?
- > What other activities or programmes besides Forest School do educators choose and why?
- > Why do woodland owners support Forest School and outdoor learning?

Gathering basic information:

- > the number and distribution of schools and other organisations who practice Forest School or outdoor learning in woodland and forests.
- > the levels of training and skills among practitioners.
- > the location of woodland owners and profile of their woodlands.

Understanding more about barriers and opportunities:

- > in establishing and sustaining Forest School practice for children.
- > how educators and woodland owners think these can be overcome in each of these areas:
 1. Woodland sites and their management.
 2. Information, networks and training.
 3. Funding and finance.
 4. Curriculum and school priorities.
 5. Qualifications, training and expertise.

Exploring potential interest among woodland owners:

- > in providing greater access to woodland sites to support Forest School and outdoor learning.
- > to understand any barriers woodland owners may face in providing a site for education activities.

In addition to exploring what educators and woodland owners were doing and why, questions were also asked about past practice, and any change over time and why, aiming to provide an indication of any barriers or opportunities to sustaining outdoor learning.



Characterisation of respondents

This section describes the characterisation of the respondents, overall, and by the three main respondent types, who are summarised consistently as follows:

School educators including Early Years Foundation Stage practitioners.

Non-school educators including external educators, employees of a non-school organisation, or home educators.

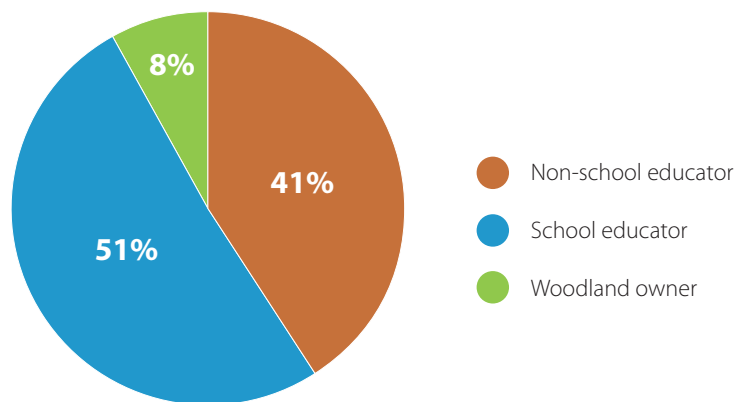
Woodland owners including those who manage on behalf of owners.

These characterisations provide important context for the main results presented in the following sections. The same colours are adopted in all figures.

Overall characterisation

Overall, there were 1,171 respondents to the survey (Figure 1). The majority (595, 51%) were *School educators*, the others being *Non-school educators* (482, 41%), and *Woodland owners* (94, 8%).

Figure 1 Distribution of main respondents types taking the survey, total 1,171



The survey was targeted at respondents in England which received the majority (95%) of responses (Figure 2), although a small number of respondents were located in Northern Ireland (4), Scotland (26), and Wales (26). Unless stated otherwise, data presented represents all respondents across the UK.

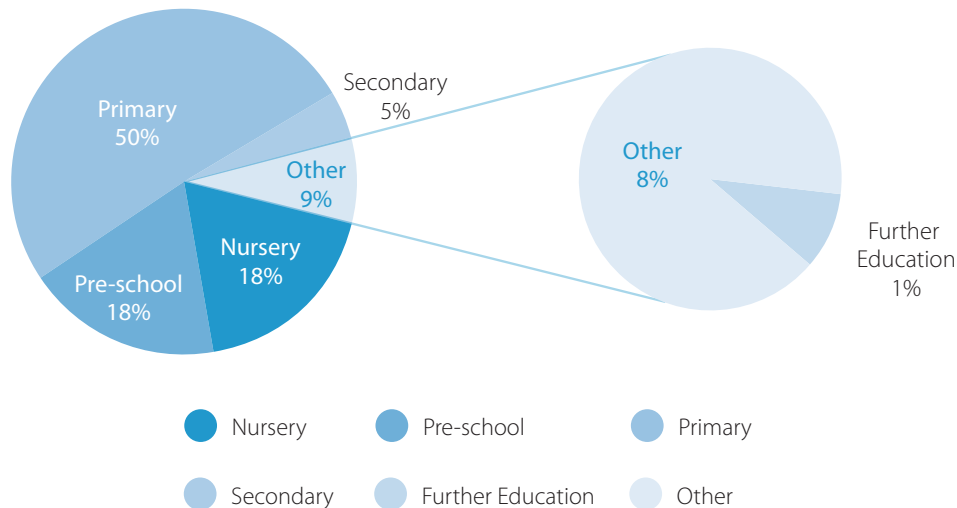
Figure 2 Locations across the UK of the three main respondents types responding to the survey.



School educators

Of the 465 respondents who described their school type, the majority (309, 50%) were from primary schools (Figure 3). Among schools represented, 28% were rated **Outstanding** by OFSTED, 65% **Good**, 7% **Requires improvement**, and none **Inadequate**. Among respondents who knew details about the proportion of pupils receiving *Pupil premium* (n=345) and *Free school meals* (n=321), the majority (69% and 71% respectively) had low proportions (0-25%) receiving either.

Figure 3 Education settings of respondents among School educators



Most individual respondents among *School educators* were *Forest School Leaders* (297, 40%), while 200 (27%) were *Teachers*, and 99 (13%) were *Teaching Assistants*. A minority were *Head teachers* (33, 4%) and *Governors* (19, 3%).

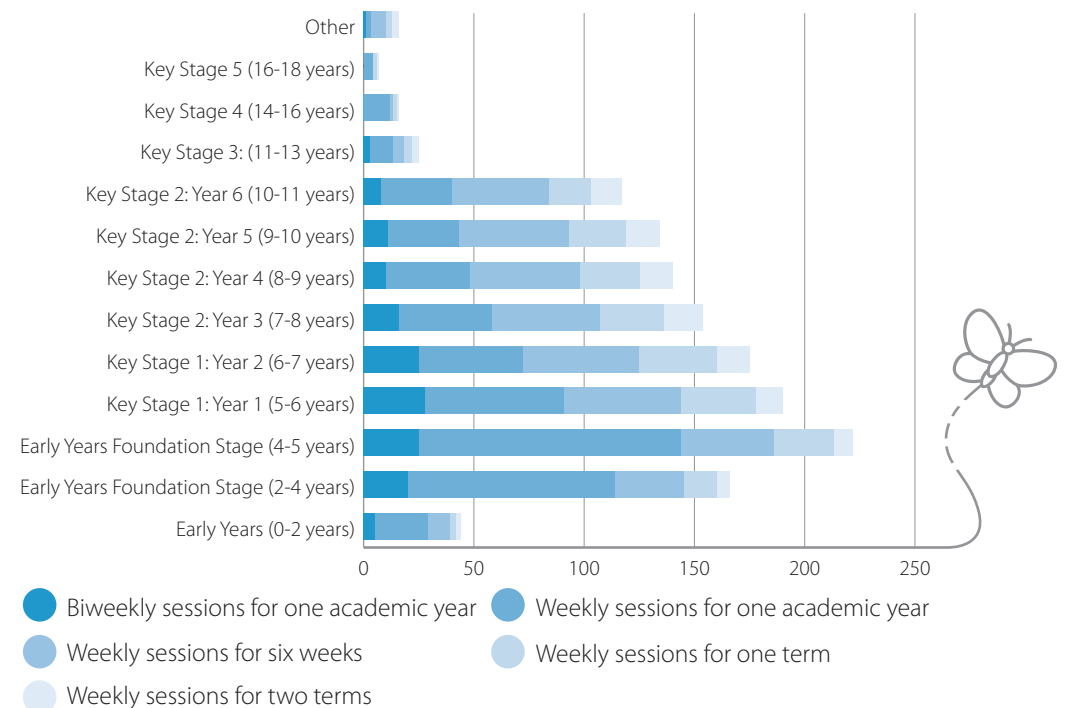
Forest School sessions were provided by 377 (30%) of *School educators*. Forest School sessions among schools were delivered mostly by school staff, and 48 contracted out to either freelance or external staff for some of this provision, and among these only five schools relied solely on freelance/external provision. Other outdoor learning activities provided among schools included *Curriculum learning outside the classroom* (327, 26%), *One-day visits* (249, 20%), *Residential* (218, 18%), and *Other* activities (74, 6%).

"[Forest School] in my opinion, allows children to establish relationships with outdoor environments and mindsets that are more likely to be sustained than one-off experiences. This is not to say that one day visits and residential trips are not beneficial and can't have a long-term impact."

School educator

Across different Key Stages, *Early Years Foundation Stage* (i.e. 0-5 year olds) was the most common age group overall, while weekly sessions for one academic year was the most frequent delivery method for Forest School (Figure 4). Among schools, *Early Years* and *Key Stage 1* (primary) combined made up 57% of Forest School provision, while *Key Stage 2* (primary) provision was 39%, and *Key Stages 3-5* (secondary schools) 4%. Combined data from both *School* and *Non-school educators*, indicated that 54% of Forest School delivery was at *Early Years* and *Key Stage 1*, 40% at *Key Stage 2*, and 6% at *Key Stages 3-5* (secondary).

Figure 4 Count of delivery of outdoor learning among School educators by different Key Stages and delivery frequency

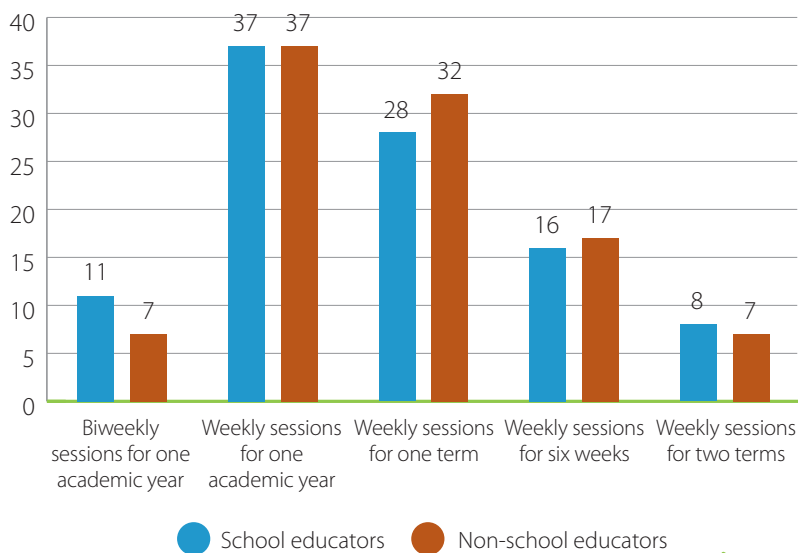


Both *School educators* and *Non-school educators* reported that *Weekly sessions for one academic year* was the most common frequency (both 37%) for delivery overall (Figure 5), the next most frequent being *Weekly for one term* (*School educators* 28% and *Non-school educators* 32%).

“A deeper understanding and connection of the natural environment is developed through regular outdoor experiences over time and through seasonal changes. These experiences become more meaningful over time and opportunities to return and repeat experiences make them more memorable and sustainable.”

School educator

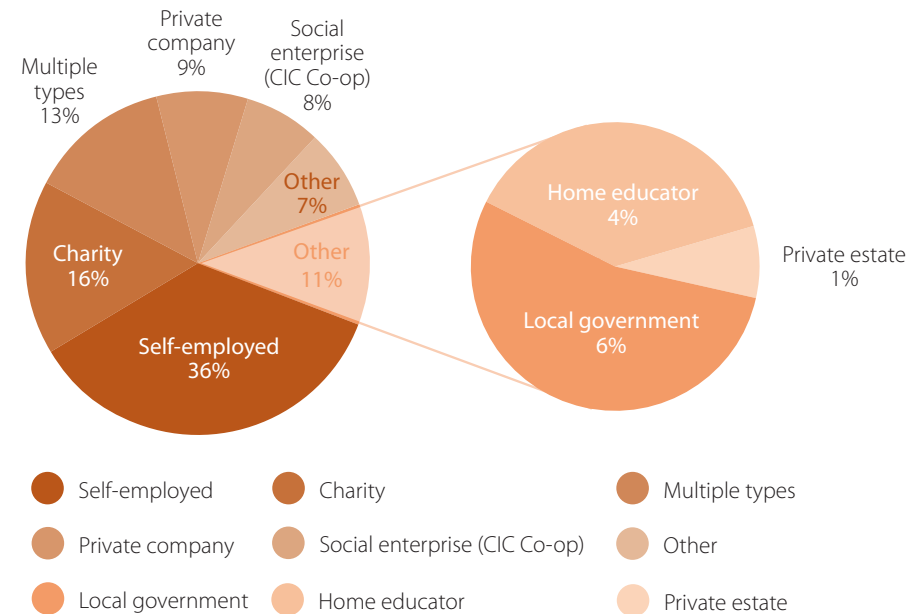
Figure 5 Percentages of *School educators* and *Non-school educators*’ provision frequency for Forest School



Non-school educators

The majority of *Non-school educators* (202, 36%) were self-employed, while 92 (16%) worked for a charity (Figure 6). The most frequent setting was a *State school* (185, 33%), followed by *Academy* (92, 16%), *Faith* (56, 10%), and *Independent* (55, 10%).

Figure 6 Education settings of respondents among *Non-school educators*

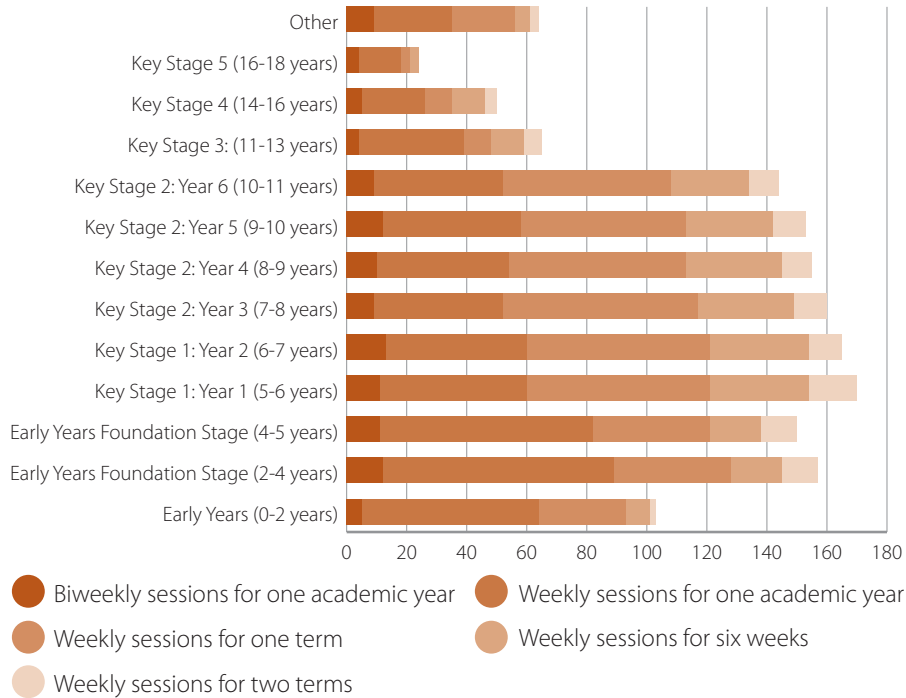


The majority (77%) of *Non-School educators* delivered Forest School sessions. Among these, most respondents (228, 25%) delivered sessions *Outside of school grounds*, with 150 (16%) delivering *Inside school grounds*, and the same number *During holiday activities*. Other means of Forest School provision included *Sessions for families* (15%), *Special needs* (10%), *Adults only* (6%), *Forest School leader training* (4%), and *Other* (7%).

Non-school educators were questioned about their membership of the Forest School Association. Of 303 respondents, 68% were members. Among other membership types, 22% were Trainees, 20% Recognised providers, 8% Trainers. Most respondents (87%) were qualified Forest School practitioners to Level 3, with only 1% being either *Level 1* or *Level 2*. Only 13 cases were reported of unqualified educators delivering Forest School.

Among *Non-school educators*, Key Stage 1, Year 1 (5-6 year olds) were the most frequent age group participating in Forest School; the most common provision for this age group was weekly for one academic year (Figure 7).

Figure 7 Count of delivery of Forest School among *Non-school educators* by different Key Stages and delivery frequency



Non-school educators reported noticing a change in demand for Forest School in the previous five years, with 78% reporting an increase, 15% no change, and 7% a decrease. Among those reporting an increase in demand, the main reason was considered to be *Increased awareness of the benefits of outdoor learning* (rank 1), followed by *Evidence of benefits from learning and being outdoors* (2), and *Word of mouth* (3). Among the small number reporting a decrease, *Finance of schools* was considered the main reason.

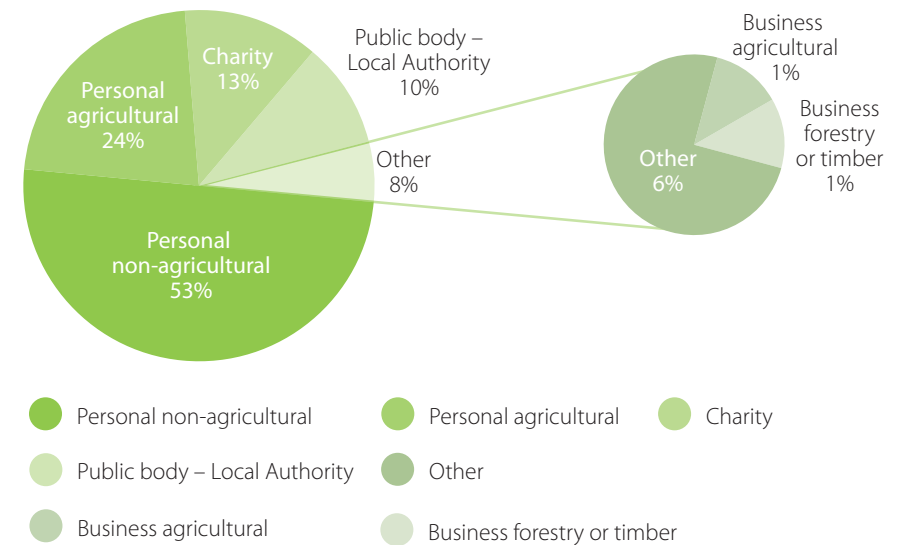
“Childminders are more and more training to be Forest School leaders and I think they are not being noticed. We can provide excellent Forest School sessions, it’s very easy for us to have access to woodland and we have very good ratios. Often meeting up in groups to provide sessions. The children stay with us for many years getting constant Forest School sessions every week, all year round.”

Non-school educator

Woodland owners and managers

Of the *Woodland owners* who provided data on their woodlands (n=74), the majority (43) identified as *Personal non-agricultural* (Figure 8). A further 39 *Non-school educators* were also woodland owners; their responses in relation to their woodlands are included here.

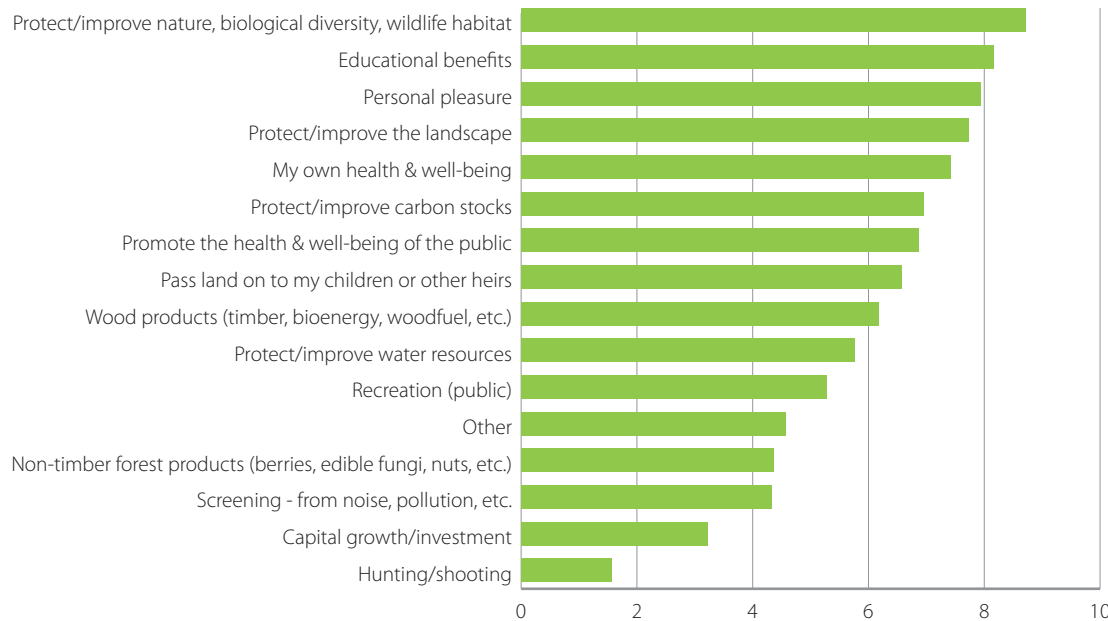
Figure 8 Characterisation of respondents among *Woodland owners/managers* (including woodland-owning *Non-school educators*)



The total area of woodland represented by woodland-owning respondents was 3,997 ha, 25% of which was *Owned*, the remainder being *Managed for others*. Among 105 respondents, a majority (64%) did not have a UK Forestry Standard-compliant management plan for the site that they managed.

Among stated aims for their woodlands, *Woodland owners* scored (0-10) *Protecting/improving nature* highest (mean score of 8.7), followed by *Educational benefits* (8.2), *Personal pleasure* (7.9) and *Protecting the landscape* (7.7) (Figure 9). This echoes exactly the results of a similar recent national survey of woodland owners^{vii} although in that case *Educational benefits* was not offered as a choice to respondents.

Figure 9 Relative importance of aims of woodlands among Woodland owners (mean scores 0-10)



“A deeper understanding and connection of the natural environment is developed through regular outdoor experiences over time and through seasonal changes.”

School educator



Main themes

The main results of the survey are presented under five main themes: **Woodland Sites, Information, Funding, Curriculum and Priorities, and Qualifications and Training.**

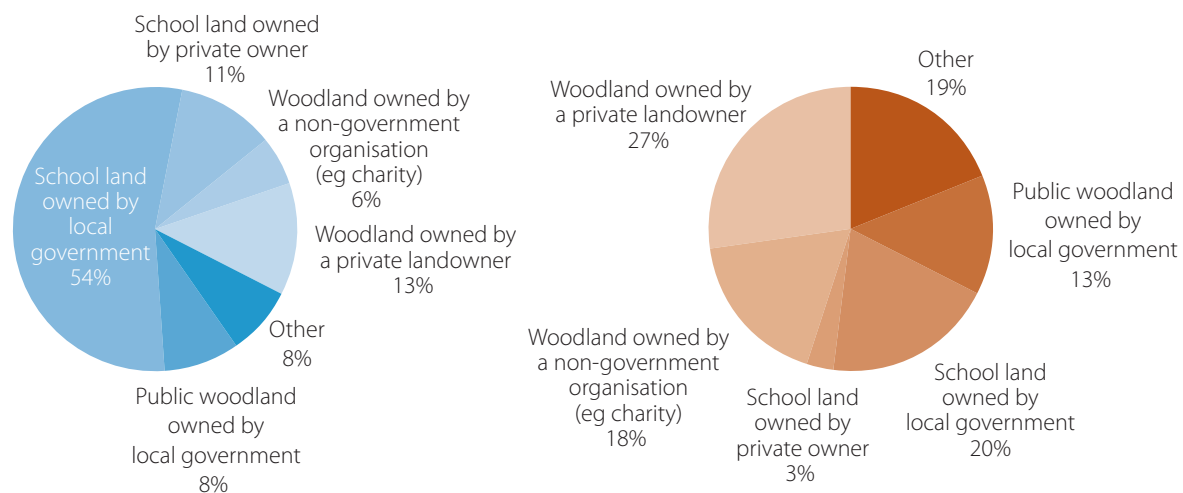
Woodland sites

Site ownership

School educators most frequently used *School land owned by local government* (54%), with 13% accessing *Woodland owned by a private landowner* (Figure 10a). Privately-owned land (charity and private landowner combined) was used by 45% of *Non-school educators* to support Forest School, but only by 19% of *School educators*.

Two-thirds of *School educators* reported that they did not pay to access a Forest School site, while slightly fewer (63%) of *Non-school educators* reported the same for sites outside of the school setting.

Figure 10 Ownership of sites accessed by (left) *School educators* (a), and (right) *Non-school educators* (b) to deliver Forest School



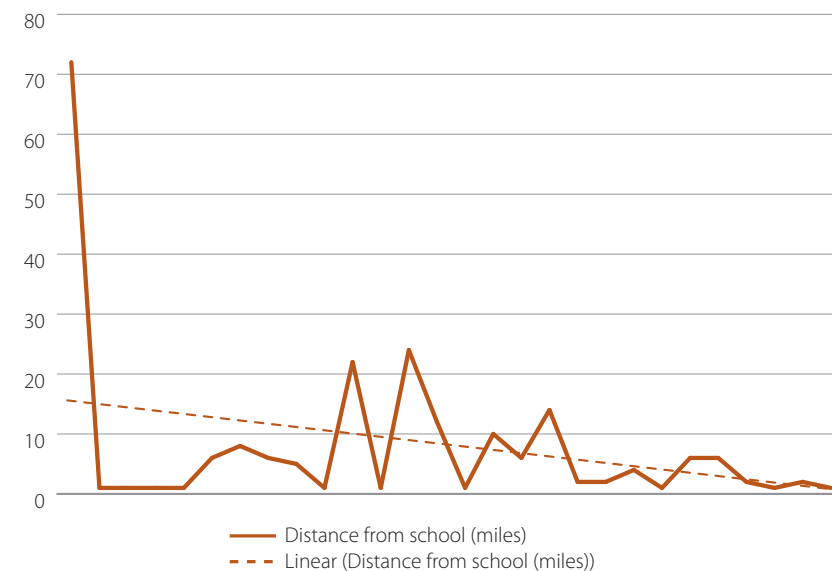
Among *Non-school educators*, *Privately-owned* woodland sites were the most frequent ownership type (Figure 10b).

Travel to Sites

The majority (85%) of *School educators* used a Forest School site within their own grounds. Among a small number (37) of *School educators* providing information about distance to a Forest School site, the majority (60%) travelled one mile or less.

The majority (68%, $n=218$) of delivery by *Non-school educators* was less than 1 mile from a school, with one-third operating on school grounds. Only 12% travelled with their group further than 5 miles to reach a site (Figure 11). The maximum distance travelled was 35 miles.

Figure 11 Count among *Non-school educators* of the distance travelled (miles) by a group to reach a Forest School site

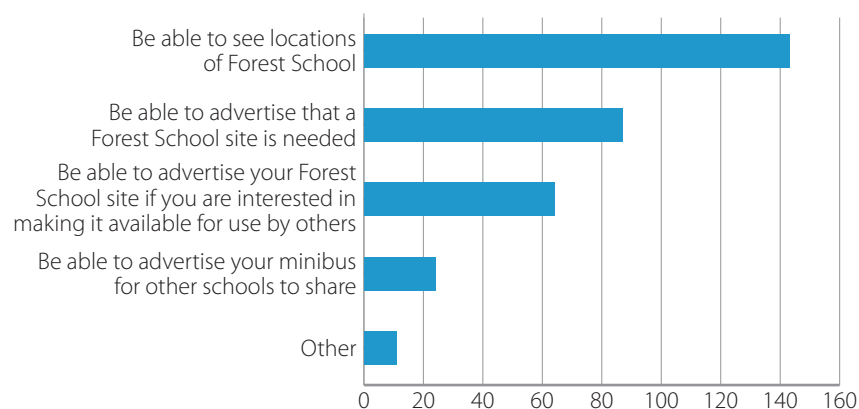


The above findings correlate with responses received to a question about modes of transport. Among 42 *School educators* and 279 *Non-school educators*, 60%/63% walked, 29%/34% used a minibus or coach, the remainder used private vehicles (e.g. parents' vehicles) or other unspecified means. Of 130 respondents who answered a question about transport costs (42 *School-educators* and 279 *Non-school educators*), 80%/83% reported £0-50, 11%/10% £50-100, the remainder more than £100. See also Funding.

Locating Education Sites

School educators were asked whether they would use a web-based platform of woodland sites, for example to search for available sites or to advertise the need for a site. Just over half (55%) said that they would be interested in such a platform, which reflects the high proportion of respondents with a Forest School on their grounds. Among a range of options for tools which a platform may offer, being *Able to see locations of Forest School sites* was ranked highest (Figure 12). A web-based platform that would help locate sites was not highly ranked by *Non-school educators* among a range of options that would help sustain Forest School (see Funding, Figure 18).

Figure 12 Features considered useful in a web-based platform (n=169)



Site Management

Among *School educators*, 64% had a site management plan, 14% were unsure if there was a plan and 22% had no plan. Of these, 7% were aware of the concept of a site management plan, but without the knowledge to prepare one, or were unaware of site management plans (22%). Various aspects of managing sites were not considered important as training needs among *School educators*, including *Setting up a Forest School site* and *Tree planting and aftercare* (see Training, Figure 23).

Non-school educators reported that Forest School leaders were most frequently responsible for site management (49%), or the landowner (42%). For the sites accessed by *Non-school educators*, 78% had a site management plan in place.

Information

Among *School educators* questioned about barriers to setting up Forest School, *Lack of information* was the least important among a range of barriers (see Funding, Figure 17).

"I found the Forest School trainers provided me with sufficient knowledge to setup my Forest School."

School educator

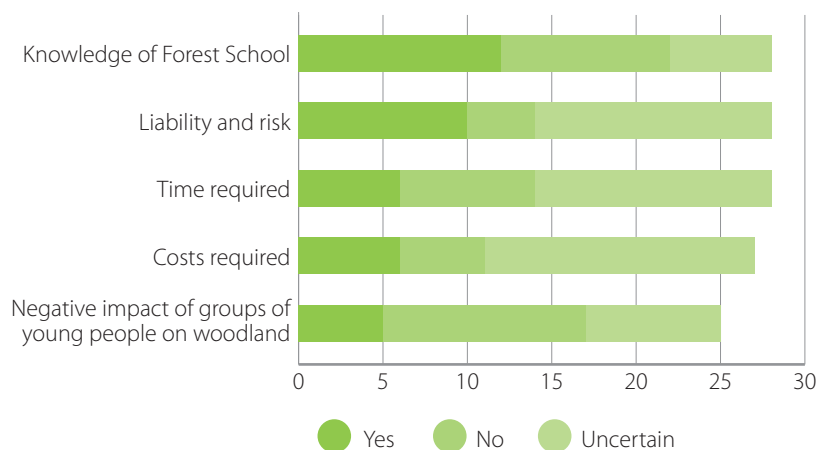
Sources of information most commonly used by both *School educators* and *Non-school educators* to learn about woodlands, trees, and forestry, were (in order of greatest importance), the Woodland Trust, Forestry Commission, and the Forest School Association.

"I feel it is important to share experiences between practitioners so that we can widen our armoury of ideas/methods."

School educator

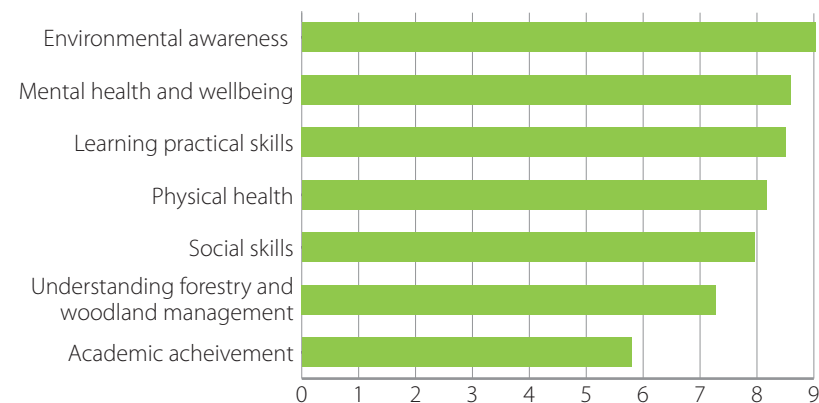
Among 73 *Woodland owners*, 77% (56) answered that a free web-based platform would be a useful resource in helping connect landowners to groups who need an outdoor education site (14% *Unsure*, 9% *Not useful*). When questioned about current barriers to supporting Forest School, among five options, *Knowledge of Forest School* was the greatest barrier among some responding *Woodland owners*, although it was clearly not a barrier for others (Figure 13).

Figure 13 Barriers to supporting Forest School activities among woodland owners



Imparting information was also the strongest motivation for current or potential future provision of outdoor education for *Woodland owners*, with *Environmental awareness* ranking top among a number of motivations, such as *Promoting mental health and wellbeing*, and *Learning practical skills* (Figure 14). Promoting *Understanding of forestry and woodland management* was of lesser importance.

Figure 14 Importance of a range of motivations for providing access to woodland sites for outdoor education among woodland owners

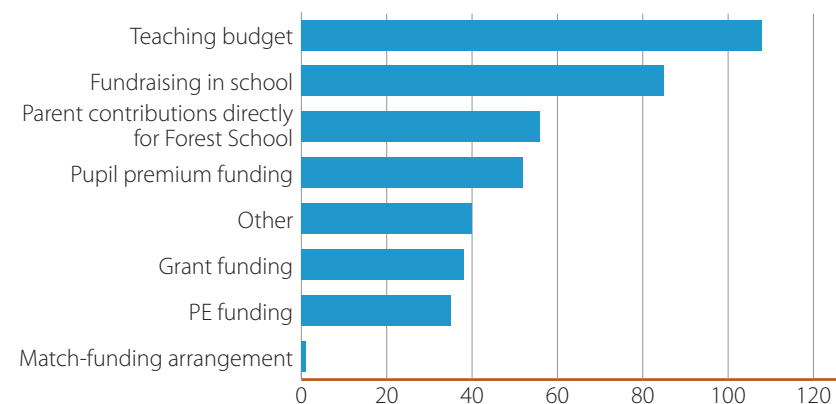


Funding

Funding Sources

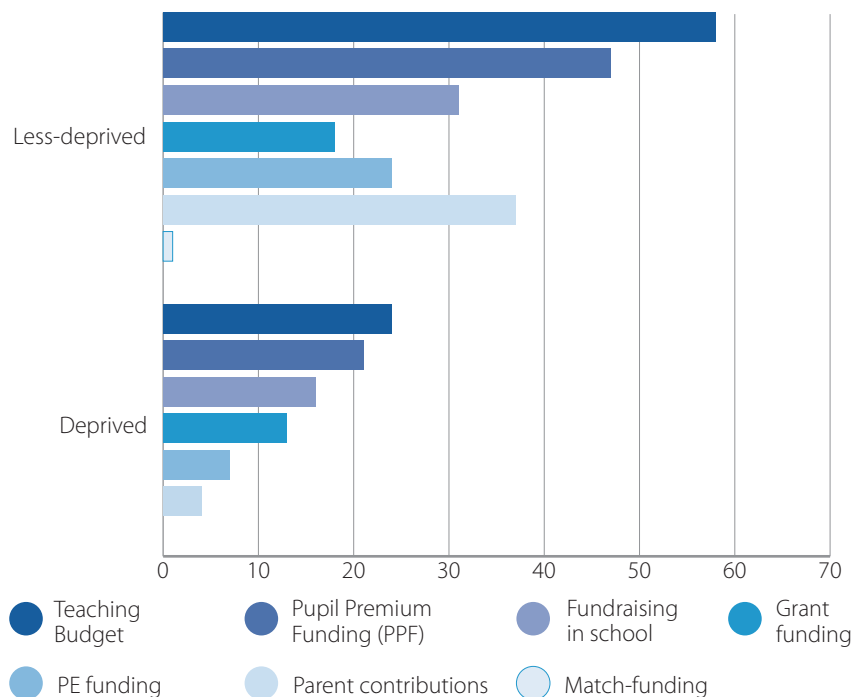
School educators reported that the *Teaching budget* was the main source of funding which supported Forest School, followed by support (in decreasing importance) by *Fundraising*, and *Parent contributions* (Figure 15).

Figure 15 Sources of funding to support Forest School among School educators



Among deprived schools (>26% Pupil Premium Funding - PPF), 30% of respondents thought that current funding sources were sustainable, while 43% were unsure and 27% thought they were not sustainable. Among less-deprived schools (<26% PPF), 44% of respondents thought that current funding sources were sustainable, while 39% were unsure and 17% thought they were not sustainable. *Parent contributions* was the third most significant funding source among less-deprived schools, but least important among deprived schools (Figure 16).

Figure 16 Relative funding priorities compared between less-deprived (<26% PPF) and deprived schools (>26%) among Schools educators



Funding as a Barrier

Lack of funding was the most frequently reported barrier experienced by *School educators* in establishing a Forest School (Figure 17), noting that *Lack of available staff* is clearly closely related to school funding. Together these two factors far outweigh *Lack of sites*, *Low school priority*, or *Lack of information* as barriers.

In contrast, when asked what was helpful in setting up a Forest School on a site, *School educators* ranked *Grants* lowest out of five measures, the most helpful being *Forest School being made a school priority*, followed by *Availability of a site*, *Access to information*, and, *Other* reasons.

Non-school educators were questioned about various interventions which may help sustain Forest School. Top-ranked was *Outdoor education becomes a statutory requirement*, followed by *Grants designed to support Forest School in schools* (Figure 18).

Figure 17 Barriers experienced by School educators in establishing Forest Schools

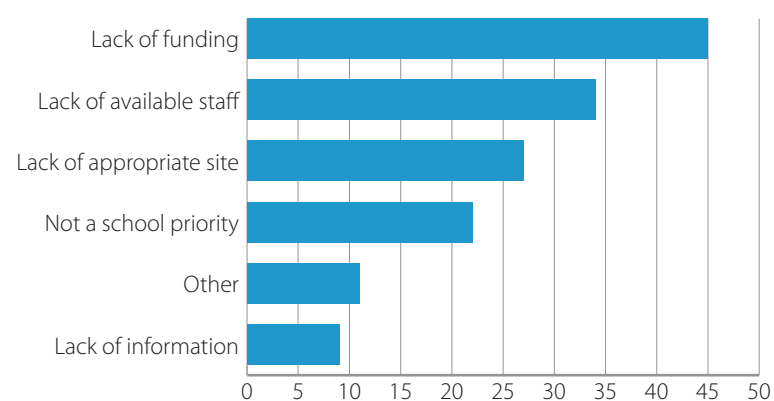
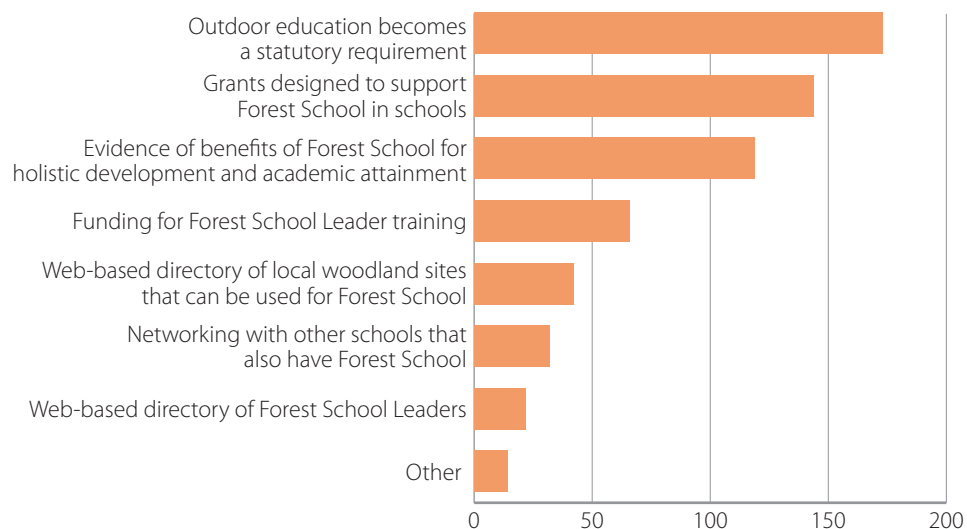


Figure 18 Top-ranking interventions that may help sustain Forest School among Non-school educators



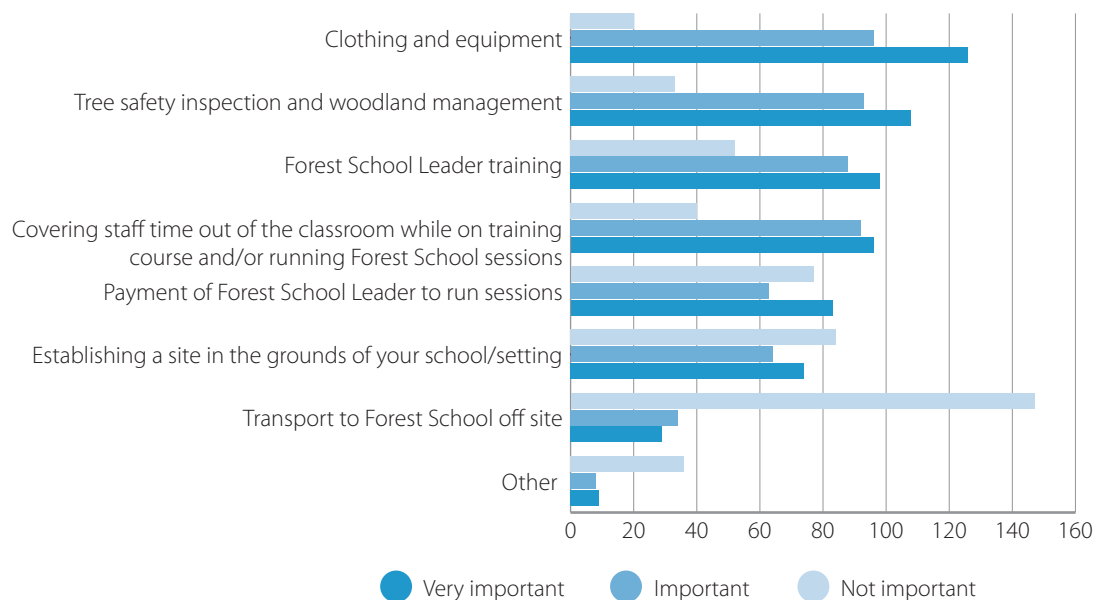
Funding Priorities

Among *School education* respondents, the highest priority for any new funding was towards *Clothing and equipment*, while a predictable response given site ownership and use (described above) was the very low importance of *Transport to a Forest School site* (Figure 19). Among *Non-school educators*, unsurprisingly the top-ranking priority was *Payment for freelance leaders to run sessions*, followed by *Clothing and equipment*, and Forest School leader training.

“We would love to develop forestry skills in our school as we have large outdoor wooded areas and many children would greatly benefit. Unfortunately, due to lack of funding we are unable to purchase necessary resources and provide training for staff.”

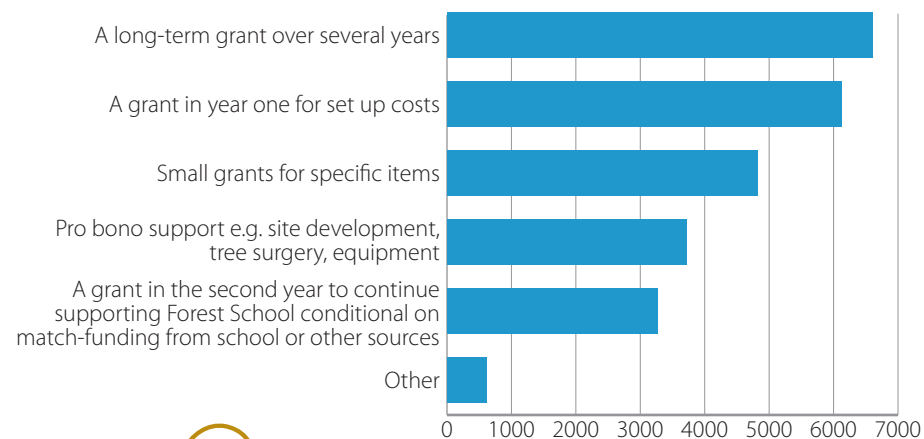
School educator

Figure 19 Relative importance of funding priorities among School educators



Preferences for different funding options among *School educators* favoured *A long-term grant over several years* over several other options (Figure 20). These results contrasted with *Non-school educators* who were most in favour of *Pro bono support* (e.g. site development, tree surgery, equipment etc.).

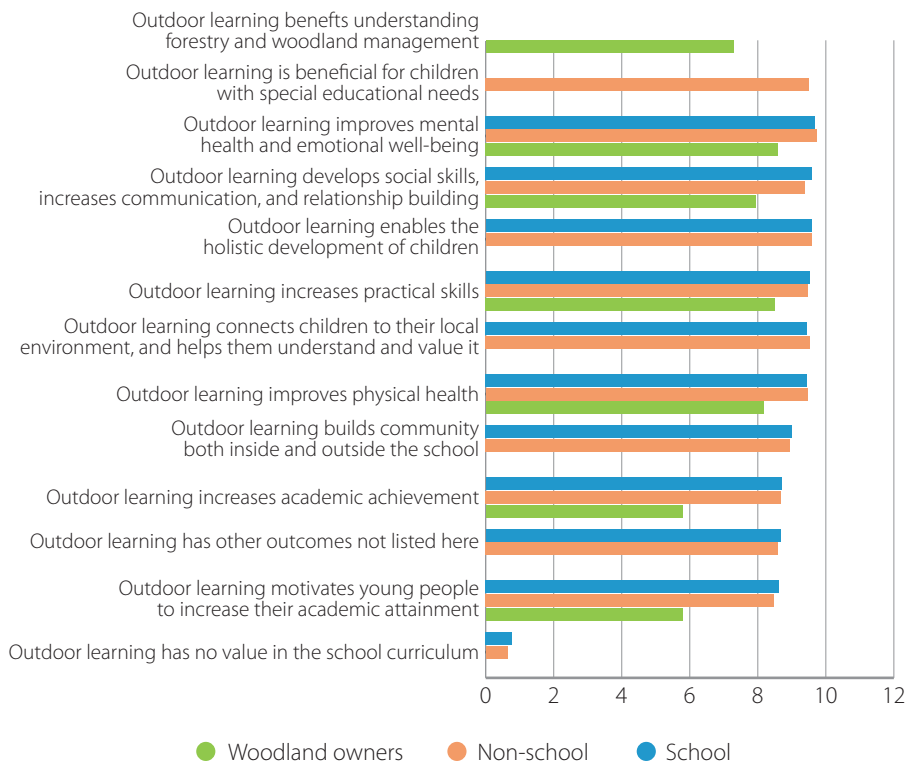
Figure 20 Sum of accumulated scores for a range of priorities for funding among School educators



Curriculum and priorities

Among all respondents, there was strong disagreement with the statement that *Outdoor learning has no value in the school curriculum* (scored from 0-10, where 0= strongly disagree) with a mean score of 0.71 across *School educators* and *Non-school educators*). The strongest support was for the benefits that outdoor learning has to *Improve mental health* (mean 9.68 for both educator groups), followed by *Enabling holistic development* (9.58), and *Developing social skills* (9.49) (Figure 21). *Woodland owners* believed strongly (8.51) that outdoor learning *Increases practical skills*.

Figure 21 Strength of agreement (mean score 0-10, where 10-strongly agree) with a range of statements, among School educators, Non-School educators, and Woodland owners. There were slight variations in the questions presented to the three main groups.



“For many children who don't succeed academically a Forest School programme provides them with a forum in which they can not only succeed but excel.”

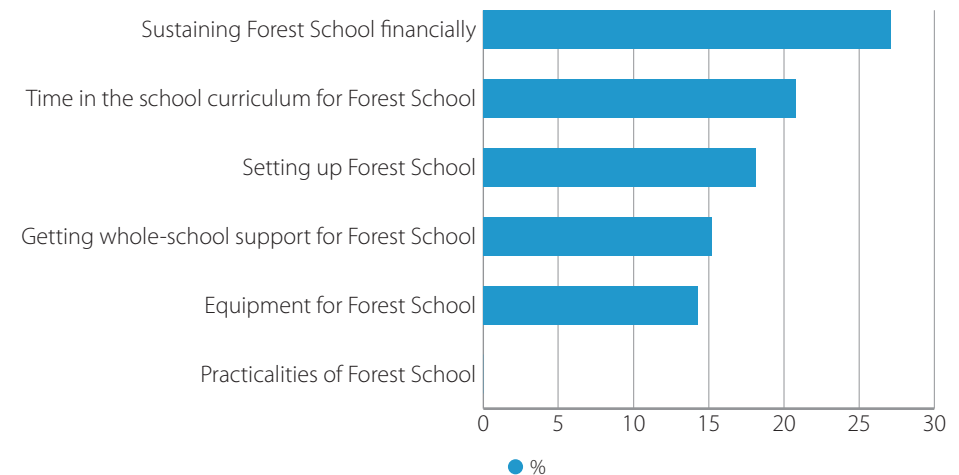
School educator

“Children that may not achieve that well in the classroom can get stuck in that role, being regarded by adults and peers as a low achiever. At Forest School they can break free from this - be the loudest, the bravest, the most creative or knowledgeable.”

School educator

Among *School educators*, *Sustaining Forest School Financially* was ranked as the most difficult of six aspects. When compared with the *Practicalities of Forest School*, which was perceived the least difficult, it scored 27% higher, followed by *Time in the school curriculum* (21%) (Figure 22). Encouragingly, 94% of respondents (n=188) had reported that overall, they found the practice of Forest School *Easy or Very easy*.

Figure 22 Magnitude of difficulty (%) among School educators concerning the delivery of Forest School, compared to Practicalities of Forest School (set at 0%).



Twenty-five *School educators* (among 72 comments concerning important factors in setting up Forest School) cited the support of Head Teacher and senior leadership team (SLT) as a crucial factor for success, with comments such as:

“Belief of Senior Leadership team in the benefits of Forest School.”
School educator

“Support from Head Teacher who believed in value of Forest School.”
School educator

“Difficulties vary from school to school. When I was training, I was based in a school with high levels of pupil premium children- lots of money but SLT didn't fully back Forest School, so it kept getting cancelled. Now I'm in a small rural school with a really supportive SLT and no money!”
School educator

A common comment concerning the curriculum among *School educators* is typified by this example:

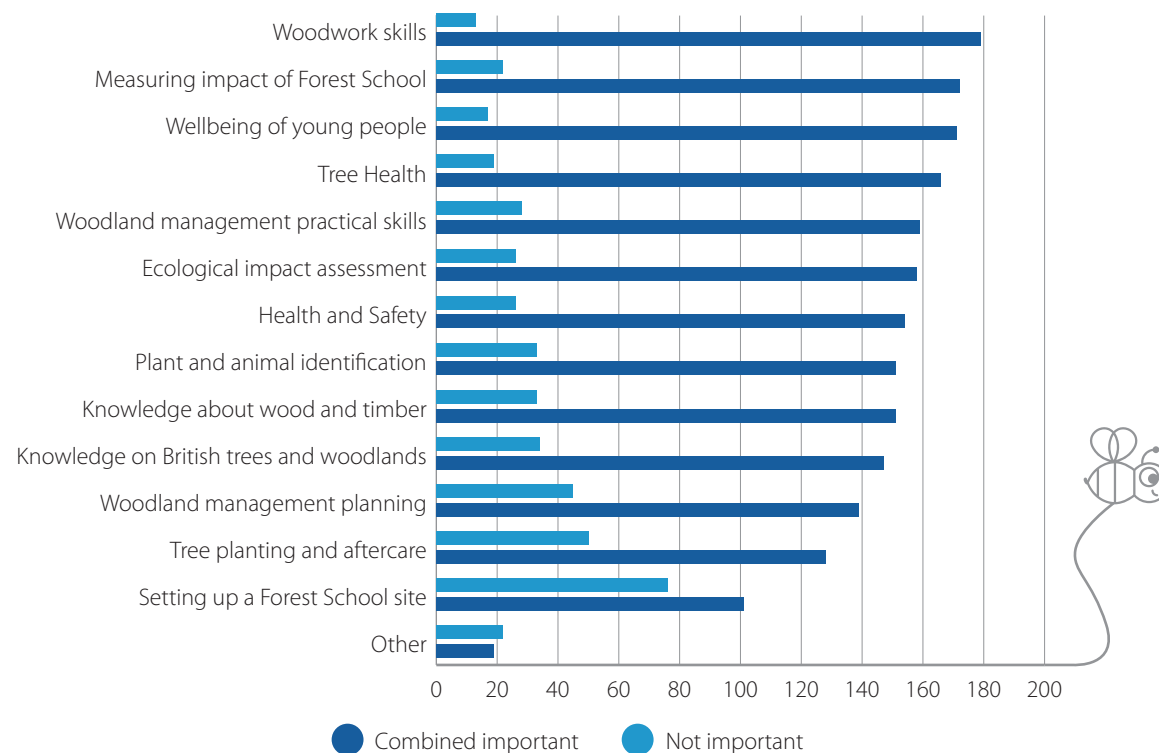
“Everybody wants it in theory but timetable pressures mean it's hard to fit it in.”
School educator

Qualifications and training

“Make more links with teacher training programmes and work with the Department of Education to impress on them the importance of our work and impact for future learning and health of people. if we don't get more outdoor learning embedded in education they will be spending much more on mental health care and counselling in primary schools!”
School educator

School educators were questioned about the importance of training and qualifications for various aspects in the delivery of outdoor learning, scoring 14 aspects *Not important*, *Important*, or *Very important*. *Setting up a Forest School* was considered *Not important* as a training need, while *Wellbeing of young people* received the highest score under *Very important*. If aspects considered *Very important* and *Important* are combined, the highest importance was afforded to *Woodwork skills*, followed by *Measuring impact of Forest School* (Figure 23).

Figure 23 Importance of training and qualifications for various aspects of outdoor learning among School educators, where 'Very Important, and 'Important' are combined.



In terms of funding priorities, *School educators* considered *Forest School Leader training* the third most important priority, after *Tree Safety* (second) and *Clothing and Equipment* (first importance).

“I can't afford the Forest School training, but do use the FS ethos in school for my weekly outdoor learning sessions. But as we have nobody who is Level 3 trained we can't say we do FS.”
School educator

“We struggle to provide training for class-based staff”
School educator

“I would like to train as Forest School leader and further develop. Forest School tends to focus on small groups whereas I need to take out whole classes, up to 30.”

School educator

Among *Non-school educators*, few respondents (rank 7 of 10 reasons) thought that *Teacher training* was causing an increase in demand for Forest School. The same group of respondents considered that *Forest School leader training* was the third most important (from 8) funding needs generally for Forest School.

Both *School* and *Non-school educators* were asked about priorities for training in managing an outdoor education site. In descending order, the greatest training needs expressed across both main groups were for *Tree safety* and *Tree health* (Table 1).

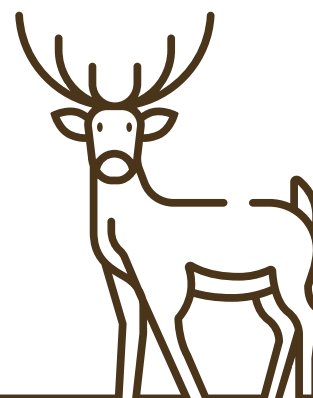
Table 1 Training needs for site management ranked among *School* and *Non-school educators*, where rank 1 is highest priority

Topic	School educators rank	Non-school educators rank
Tree health	1	2
Tree safety	2	1
Ecology	3	3
Forest School site set up	4	6
Species identification	5	4
Forestry	6	5

Among *Woodland owners*, only 25% of respondents considered *Training* to be helpful in supporting their educational activities on sites that they own or manage.

“For many children who don’t succeed academically a Forest Schools programme provides them with a forum in which they can not only succeed but excel.”

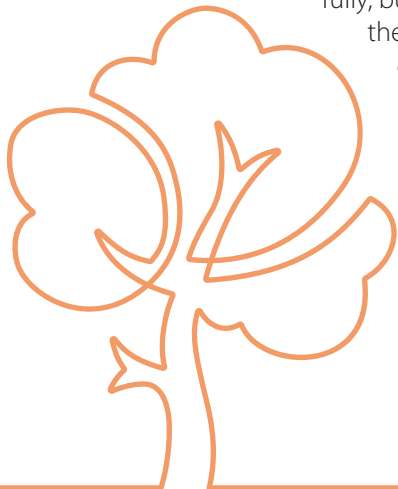
School educator



Discussion

The *Bringing Children Closer to Nature* survey conducted in winter 2018 provided a snapshot of some current Forest School practice and outdoor learning activities in schools and woodland sites, located mostly in England (95% of respondents). The response by 1,171 stakeholders was encouraging, and provided the researchers a wealth of information to explore more deeply under the three main themes stated in the INTRODUCTION: 1) Gathering basic information, 2) Understanding more about barriers and opportunities, and 3) Exploring potential interest among woodland owners.

As part of the *Forest Schools for All* project the survey had a specific aim to find out about current Forest School practice, and barriers and opportunities to its sustainability. "Forest School is a specialised learning approach that sits within and complements the wider context of outdoor and woodland education^{viii}". In order to represent fully the diversity of other outdoor learning approaches in wooded sites that young people take part in during the school day, the survey included some questions on these aspects. It was not feasible for the survey to explore each and every different outdoor learning approach fully, but it is recognised that there is a very wide range of options available to educators which also aim to bring children closer to nature.



Gathering basic information

One-third (30%) of school respondents practiced Forest School, and similarly 26% practiced some form of curriculum-based learning outside the classroom. Less than 10% practiced both. These results indicate a diversity of outdoor learning provision, while the practice of Forest School and its ethos is complimentary to other types of outdoor learning activities. There is potential for Forest School and other outdoor learning provision to expand beyond its current level, although a number of barriers exist (see below). The majority of provision of Forest School within schools was undertaken by school staff, supported occasionally by external providers (in this survey referred to as '*Non-school educators*').

We learnt that 57% of Forest School practice is taking place in Early Years Foundation Stage settings (ages 0-5 years old) and Key Stage 1 ('Infants' ages 5-7 years old) of primary schools. This is a predictable result because timetables and curricula become increasingly restricted with age. Early Years and Key Stage 1 allow most flexibility, while for Key Stage 2 (primary school 'Juniors' ages 7 – 11 years old) we recorded 39% provision. This result challenges a commonly held belief that there is very much less provision at Key Stage 2 than at Key Stage 1, the difference among our respondents being only 21%. Forest School practice provided by secondary schools (ages 11-18 years old) was very low among our respondents (4%), however our results indicate that there is greater provision of secondary school Forest School led mostly by *Non-school educators*. It was encouraging to note that while very much less common, Forest School provision for 11-16-year-old children is taking place in some secondary schools, so there may be value in bringing this age group closer to nature. The fundamental constraints of timetables and the curriculum were repeated time and again in open comments.

"It can be frustrating working within the constraints of a busy secondary school. Although I have support from colleagues and leadership, ultimately I am the only trained FS leader so feel that I am spread quite thinly."
School educator

Both *School* and *Non-school educators* reported that the most common delivery of Forest School was weekly sessions over one academic year, the next most common being shorter periods of weekly sessions for one term. Many comments from respondents emphasised the importance and impact on children of long-term, regular Forest School sessions to enable connection with the natural world. The number of respondents running Forest School sessions over shorter periods, such as one term rather than one year, may indicate a tension between practice and aspiration. One of the six key principles of Forest School practice, as promoted by the Forest School Association, is that "Forest School is a long-term process of regular sessions, rather than one-off or infrequent visits; the cycle of planning, observation, adaptation and review links each session^{viii}".

Most schools in our survey had established Forest School or other outdoor learning sites within their school grounds, and it was the *Non-school educators* who were most likely to require transport for pupils to sites away from schools.

Barriers and opportunities among educators

Woodland Sites

Most schools reported having a site within their school grounds, and those that went out of school did not pay to access a woodland site. It is likely that schools use their own grounds as a resource for Forest School and outdoor learning to reduce costs of transport to other locations, however costs of maintaining these sites may be a barrier to sustaining Forest School and outdoor learning.

A high proportion of both *School* and *Non-school educators* had woodland management plans in place for their Forest School sites, both on school grounds and in woodlands outside of schools. Woodland management plans for Forest School sites are a requirement for Forest School practitioners seeking to qualify for their Level 3 Leader award, therefore we would expect the respondents of this survey who practice Forest School to have a high proportion of site management plans in place. Nonetheless, it is a positive indication that woodlands are not simply being used as a resource for education and play, but are being cared for by groups who manage them for multiple aims, including wildlife, tree health, and environmental protection. The knowledge and practice of woodland management is therefore likely to be shared with the children participating in Forest School sessions on these sites, increasing public understanding of woodland management. Forest School is unique amongst other outdoor learning approaches in its requirement for a trained Level 3 Leader to run sessions, and produce a site management plan.

The majority of respondents requiring a site outside of school grounds accessed this on foot, keeping costs and time constraints to a minimum, but we recognise the relatively low proportion of respondents to our survey from deprived schools, some of which will be in larger urban

conurbations to which access to suitable outdoor sites is much more difficult for a variety of reasons, as summed up in these comments about barriers:

“Lack of school grounds due to inner city school.”

School educator

“Issues arise around enabling those from inner city areas on low incomes to be able to access [Forest School], particularly when they do not have access to transport. My setting seems to only attract middle to high income families who are prepared to go that little bit out of the way to find our setting and make the effort to bring their children.”

School educator

There was interest among educators for a web-based platform to search for woodland sites, or to link educators with woodland owners. This interest was matched by woodland owners (see below). We anticipate the interest in this concept among educators would have been much greater had the survey attracted more respondents without suitable sites within their school grounds, for example from city schools or rural schools with small grounds.

Information

It was encouraging to discover that lack of information was not a barrier to educators when setting up a Forest School site, and a number of well-known sources — including Woodland Trust, Forestry Commission, and the Forest School Association — were mentioned as important sources of information. Good information was also recognised as significant in helping to support the establishment of Forest School among schools. This result could reflect the training and support educators receive in their Forest School Leader Level 3 qualification, a requirement of which is to set up a Forest School site as well as demonstrate how to establish Forest School within a school.

When asked about barriers to supporting Forest School, woodland owners rated knowledge of Forest School and information on liability and risk above other barriers. The survey indicates a practical tension among the woodland owners who responded between enthusiasm to support education, with access to information to enable them to set up a woodland site for education.

Funding

Given the importance of the school budget in supporting Forest School and outdoor learning, any further constraints on budgets will lead to increased threat on provision.

The divergence in importance of parental contributions between deprived and less-deprived was strongly evident in our results. For certain schools, in particular deprived schools in urban areas, the additionality of barriers including lack of suitable sites, costs of transport, and lack of funding, are likely to conspire to make provision of outdoor learning a challenging prospect. Grant packages tailored to tackling these barriers may be ideal if children in such areas are to benefit from being closer to nature.

Funding for protective outdoor clothing and equipment was the highest priority among our school respondents, providing a clear opportunity for straightforward intervention by funders. The preferred form of any funding was also clearly a long-term support lasting a number of years, rather than one-off interventions or grants for specific items. In contrast, *Non-school educators* favoured *pro bono* support which suggests ample opportunity for others in the forestry and arboricultural sectors to lend their support. Considering the highest training needs identified for site management (see below), this would tie in well with advice or support being offered to schools by suitably trained forestry or arboricultural professionals. There is perhaps a case to devise a simple scheme to enable exchange of information, resources and skills, again through a web-based platform of some form.

Curriculum and Priorities

The importance of core support from school Head Teachers, leadership teams and/or whole school staff was frequently repeated in comments by *School educators*, who also expressed the need to find ways to measure and justify the value of Forest School, for example:

“Getting acknowledgement of value of Forest School converted into more time and funding to enable it to happen more widely across the school.”

Non-school educator

Non-school educators clearly ranked the need for outdoor education to become a statutory requirement as the most significant intervention which could help sustain Forest School. A number of policy-related comments were submitted by respondents, both *School* and *Non-school*, including:

“Government is inconsistent in its statements regarding the benefits of ‘outdoor learning’. One dept recognises this whilst another dept is requiring schools to get more children passing exams from an earlier age. This appears to be achieved by having narrow, restrictive timetables geared towards passing exams.”

Non-school educator

“How can we start a campaign to get funding from central government for setting up Forest School; purchasing land, erecting a suitable out building for tools, equipment and respite in poor weather?”

School educator

“If outdoor learning becomes mandatory, should there be some Government funding towards this – to assist with transport provision when schools don't have their own suitable outdoor area?”

Non-school educator

Since the survey was launched in late 2018, Ofsted published a new inspection framework in 2019 with changes that may address the concerns raised in the quotes above. In particular, new key judgement criteria of ‘personal development’ may enable schools to increase Forest School and outdoor learning practice (see discussion below) to achieve this aim.

Qualification and Training

Risk-related training needs clearly rank among the highest priorities for all educators in managing an outdoor education site, specifically training on *Tree health* (in itself leading to potential tree safety issues), and *Tree safety*. That said, as noted above, these can be highly complex areas even for tree professionals (requiring specific insurances for example), so opportunities to provide funds to gain professional support, and/or link educators with professionals under some *pro bono* arrangement, may offer a better solution. The constraints of time on educators noted earlier, further support this.

Wellbeing of young people was one of several training needs considered important by school educators for delivery of outdoor learning. Such a strength of opinion may have arisen because of respondents being more aware of an increase in mental health issues among young people. In addition, a new Ofsted framework due in place from September 2019^x includes a category to judge how schools help learners to keep themselves mentally and physically healthy. It is encouraging to see from our survey that nearly all respondents strongly agreed with the statements that outdoor learning can improve mental health, enable holistic development, and develop social skills. Therefore, Forest School and outdoor learning of all kinds, are ideally placed to deliver the personal development requirements of Ofsted's new framework.

Interest among woodland owners

Among the relatively modest number of woodland owners responding to this survey, interest in education was strongly evident. The ranking of education as the second highest aim in this survey, ranked above *Personal pleasure* and *Protecting the landscape*, suggests that this choice should be offered in surveys of woodland owners (such as the *British Woodlands Survey*) in future.

A small majority (54%) of *Woodland owners* were not in receipt of any payments for education provision; a finding backed up by *Non-school educators’* responses. Given the strong motivation to support outdoor learning among *Woodland owner* respondents, and their willingness to offer sites without charging, this supports the interest from both recipient and donor in some form of web-based platform in bringing the two together. However, we believe our *Woodland owner* respondents may not have reflected a wider cross section of owner typologies (*i.e.* comparisons of this survey's findings with the 2017 *British Woodlands Survey*), so it would be helpful to conduct follow-up research to explore what, if any financial or other inducement, would be most welcome by a wider range of private landowners.

Concern about liability and risk among woodland owners was strongly expressed. External factors, in particular the spread of tree diseases or pathogens such as ash dieback, only accentuate such concerns. Landowners already grappling with public rights of way, or with trees neighbouring transport corridors, may be cautious in opening up more of their woodland, particularly to vulnerable groups such as children. The case for practical advice and information tailored for woodland owners, including risks and liabilities associated with the provision of a site for outdoor learning, is very strong. This was supported by the lack of information being seen as a barrier by most woodland owners. In addition, sharing successful case studies of landowners who are already enabling Forest School and outdoor learning in their woodlands may inspire and reassure other woodland owners.

Next steps

A huge amount of data was gathered through the survey. While many of the central questions under the Forest Schools for All project have been addressed in this report, a wealth of additional data remains unexplored. In particular, analyses of the relationship between one response (or responder) and another, can often reveal important linkages. Only a small number of any such analyses have been undertaken for this report, and the data would benefit from deeper analysis. Sylva Foundation welcomes expressions of interest and collaboration among other interested parties, from student researchers to policy makers.

It is clear that there were some areas of the research undertaken that either received a low response from particular audiences, or which revealed areas of clear interest for follow up research. Among the latter, follow-up qualitative research on schools in deprived areas would be highly advantageous, which could take the form of structured interviews. Our knowledge about the level and value of provision in secondary schools, and their barriers and opportunities, remains poor. Further research to understand better why some schools are not offering any outdoor learning would also be advantageous and why some schools may be achieving successful outcomes with particular age groups (for example Key Stage 2 Primary pupils).

Interest expressed among survey participants concerning measuring impacts of outdoor learning on mental wellbeing, suggests some interesting possibilities for new research, plus better guidance and more partnership working between the mental health and outdoor learning sectors. Selecting schools of different sizes, different rural and urban locations and from a range of areas of high or low deprivation, and monitoring the impact of Ofsted's new 2019 inspection framework on outdoor learning

provision and personal development would be timely as schools adopt the new framework from September 2019. Focus groups with Head Teachers, senior leadership teams, and school governors would enable further understanding of barriers to outdoor learning and their views would be key in the design of any interventions.

Gathering more information about training, qualifications and programmes that support outdoor learning other than Forest School would be beneficial. Where, when, and how the most effective training takes place for educators, would also be a valuable area of research; some teacher training institutions are known to include outdoor learning and Forest School in courses for new teachers. A diversity of outdoor learning practice was indicated in this survey, so further research showing the variety of ways Forest School and other outdoor learning approaches are being used in combination or separately would be of interest, potentially in generating case studies that show how whole school approaches to outdoor learning, other programmes, and/or regular weekly Forest School throughout the year, are possible and effective in bringing all children closer to nature.

This survey has focussed on asking the adults who, in our society, are the gatekeepers to providing outdoor learning and Forest School to young people. The voices of young people have not been heard in this particular study, but are essential to include when designing projects and making assessments on the impact and value of being in nature during the school day. The duration and setting of outdoor learning, and Forest School in particular, would suit participatory action research approaches with young people to involve them in framing the research questions, designing the methods, reflecting on results and developing their own recommendations for what would bring them closer to nature and its impact.

A number of opportunities have arisen to devise and implement better support and information, particularly related to woodland sites and their owners. These include some kind of platform to bring seekers and givers of potential outdoor learning sites together, plus better advice to landowners concerning risks, model landowner agreements, and benchmark of site standards. A similar system could bring together those who seek advice, resources, skills, with those prepared to exchange them *pro bono* or otherwise. For schools, tailored support in the form of fundraising support packs or information packs promoting the benefits of outdoor learning to governors, could be useful interventions. The hosting and delivery of all the above could be combined in some form of online platform.

In future work, both research and delivery, it would be helpful to widen consideration of woodland ownership to include those less obvious, such as universities, public schools, church, councils, utilities, corporations and others, as this may prove particularly effective in locating more sites within urban areas.

Sylva Foundation also holds specific data of interest to the Forest School Association, and will be exploring further with the Forest School Association how these data may help further the effectiveness of its provision.

Under the *Forest Schools for All* project, Sylva Foundation will initially work with local, regional and national funders and partners to pilot projects across selected English counties. These interventions will be designed to overcome many of the barriers to Forest School and outdoor learning identified by the educators and woodland owners who responded to this survey. These pilot projects will be monitored for effectiveness and then used to achieve impact across England through delivery with partners in other regions. Ultimately, it is hoped that all young people in England and beyond will be brought closer to nature.

Key recommendations

- I. **Schools** with successful Forest School and/or outdoor learning should be advocates and share experience with schools that do not have Forest School and outdoor learning programmes.
- II. **Government** should consider the significant societal and financial benefits arising from embedding the provision of outdoor learning in the curriculum.
- III. The **outdoor learning sector** should be proactive in advancing further the school curriculum by working closely with government.
- IV. The **forestry and arboricultural sector** should explore how best to support educators in providing tree and site management advice.
- V. **New grant schemes** should be designed and tested that would help overcome barriers to outdoor learning, and support sought from grant providers.
- VI. **A new online platform** could be designed to support outdoor learning among practitioners and woodland owners, and funding sought for its delivery.
- VII. **Further research** should be commissioned to increase understanding of the needs of deprived schools, and how barriers may be overcome.



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www.sylva.org.uk/forestschools