



How to set up a Forest School

- *from the roots up!*



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The Forest School Association

The Forest School Association (FSA) is the professional body and UK wide voice for the Forest School community, promoting best practice, cohesion and '**Quality Forest School for All**'.

We provide support to our members and the Forest School community. We create guidance material for practitioners, schools and parents and work with FSA Local Groups around the country to ensure that a strong and clear vision of what Forest School is communicated throughout the UK.

Introduction

This booklet has been created to support people who are looking to set up a Forest School, become a Forest School practitioner or are 'Forest School curious'. The document is a reflective tool to help prospective leaders navigate through common problems encountered by the community during Forest School delivery.

The booklet will inform readers about the basics of Forest School so they can go on to get the most from their Forest School training course.

We hope to highlight several key areas that could be useful in your Forest School journey as you advocate for Forest School, plan for its creation or begin to implement your Forest School dreams.

To find out more about Forest School, or to join our Forest School community visit our website at: www.forestschoolassociation.org

Forest School is a type of outdoor education which facilitates the holistic development of the learner through play, risk-taking and nature connection.

What is Forest School?

Forest School is a type of outdoor education which facilitates the holistic development of the learner through play, risk-taking and nature connection. Forest School is an ethos-driven process and is governed by six core principles.

Like many ethos-based approaches, it is the interplay between the core principles that creates the unique environment found at Forest School.

It is only when the six principles are found together that we will see the subtle and complex holistic progression that Forest School is designed to deliver.

Forest School and Outdoor Education

The FSA believes that all outdoor education is of value. If you remove any of the six principles you may still have a valuable outdoor experience, but it won't be Forest School. If you find that you cannot meet all our six principles then perhaps Forest School is not what you are looking for?

[Watch our 5-minute 'What is Forest School?' video on our website](#)



The Six Core Principles

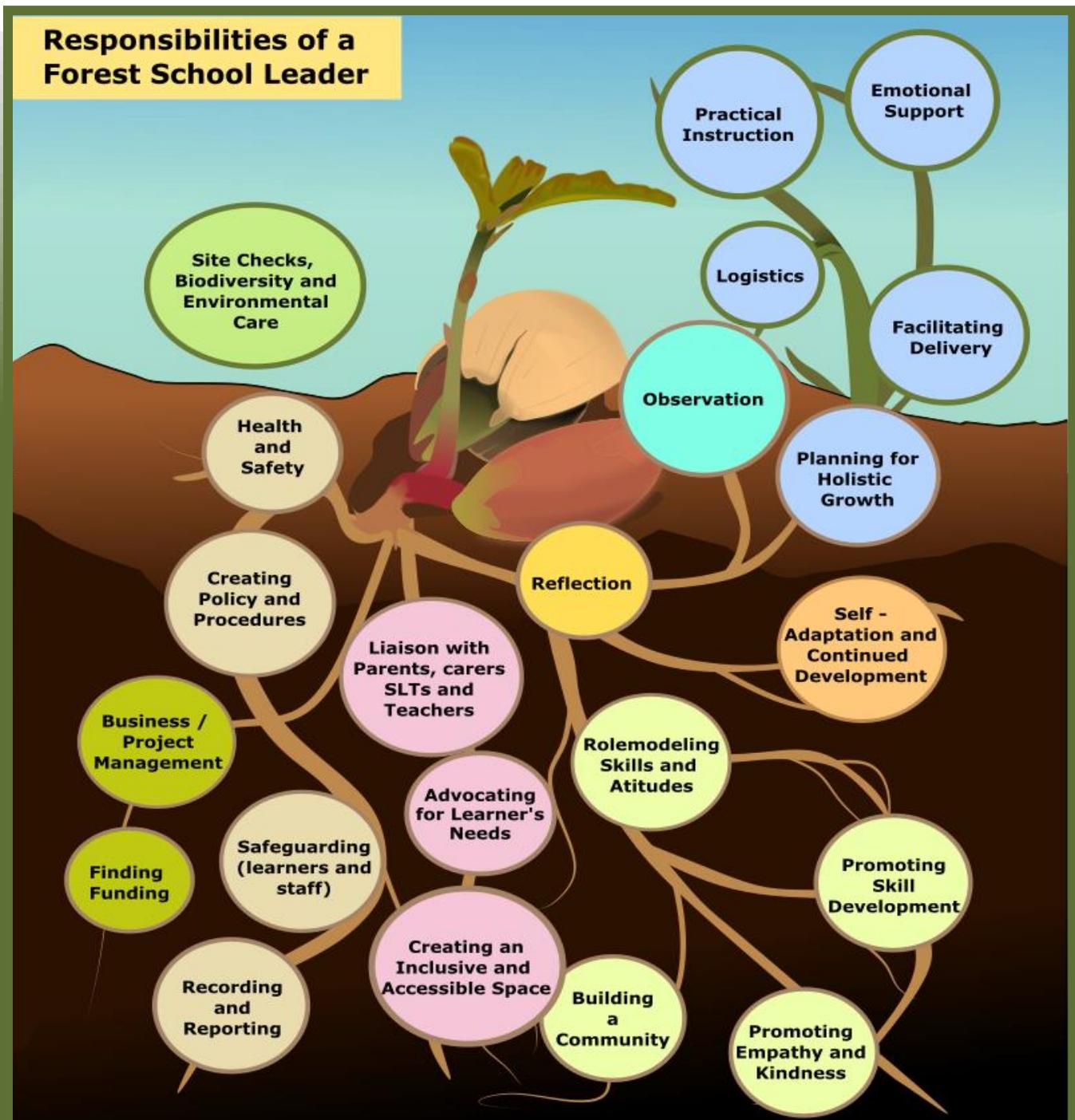
- Forest School is a long-term process of regular sessions, rather than one-off or infrequent visits; the cycle of planning, observation, adaptation and review links each session.
- Forest School takes place in a woodland or natural environment to support the development of a lifelong relationship between the learner and the natural world.
- Forest School uses a range of learner-centred processes to create a community for being, development and learning.
- Forest School aims to promote the holistic development of all involved, fostering resilient, confident, independent and creative learners.
- Forest School offers learners the opportunity to take supported risks appropriate to the environment and to themselves.
- Forest School is run by [qualified Forest School practitioners](#), who continuously maintain and develop their professional practice.

The Roles and Responsibilities of a Forest School Leader

A Forest School leader has many responsibilities (see the illustration below) and this is not a job to undertake lightly. The best way to see what a Forest School Leader does is to see them in action, and talk with them. Why not visit one of our FSA Recognised Providers? You can find a map on the Forest School Association website to find Recognised Providers near you.



[Link to find an FSA Recognised Provider](#)



Is Forest School right for me or my setting?

That is a very challenging question for us to answer because each reader will have their own goals and aims. However, there is a way to systematically work through the question by using the **Five Steps to Forest School below**.

Step 1. Identify what you want or need

Clearly identify your goals and specific objectives. You may find that it helps to write these down. It is a good idea to separate out your personal wants/needs/aspirations from any specific client/customer/management problems or issues that you think setting up Forest School provision may be able to resolve. You need to be very clear about what it is you want or need before being able to decide if Forest School is for you.

Here are some examples of why other Forest School leaders began their journey:

- I wanted to be working outside
- I want to work with participants to develop self-esteem, confidence and encourage holistic growth
- My school needed to provide a more holistic experience for children especially with SEN groups
- My nursery wanted to differentiate itself from others
- I wanted to help my local community

If you find that Forest School is not for you take a look at the Institute for Outdoor Learning's webpage for more ideas of what other options are available to you.

[Link to the IOL outdoor education advice page.](#)

Step 2. Is Forest School suitable?

This part of the reflection process is an initial screening. Suitability looks at whether setting up Forest School provision would address the personal goals and specific client related objectives that you identified in step one.

Answering this question in isolation helps to prevent getting bogged down in the '*HOW* it is going to happen?' and '*WHO* is going to do it?' discussions. Reading around the Forest School principles, ethos, outcomes, and the role of the Forest School leader will help you answer this question.

If you need more information on setting up a Forest School you can find it in our upcoming book. To get updates on when it will be ready select the link below.

[Update Me!](#)



Step 3. Is doing Forest School feasible?

If you think that Forest School is suitable for you or your setting, the next stage is thinking through the feasibility of the idea. This will establish whether or not setting up Forest School provision is possible in your circumstances.

You will need to think about resources to assess the feasibility of your venture:

- **Do you have the resources, aptitude and abilities to establish Forest School provision? If not, are you able to acquire them?**
- **Do you have the organisational structure, management support, organisational culture, to make the initiative work? Or can you create it?**
- **Do you have a definite market and is it big enough or can you grow it?**



Some obvious resources that you will need are: the land to conduct your Forest School programmes on, suitably qualified staff (possible training costs) and equipment.

Will you be able to support ongoing costs such as insurance, CPD, equipment renewal etc?

Is there a market for your provision? This could be by meeting an internal need within an educational setting or having enough customers who want your Forest School leader services. Would you be able to cope with a period of low demand or have the capacity to handle increased demand?

Even if you decide that it is possible for you to set up Forest School provision that does not mean that you should do it. The next section may help you make that decision.



Step 4. Is Forest School acceptable?

The acceptability aspect of this reflection is about understanding the return, risk and possible stakeholder reactions to the implementation of your plan.

- **Will your Forest School provision be acceptable to all key stakeholders? These are the people who can directly influence or will be influenced by your initiative.**
- **Returns will be measured based on the benefits that stakeholders expect to see. These could be financial as well as non-financial, depending on the stakeholders' interests.**
- **For-profit initiatives are likely to calculate returns based on financial measures such as profitability and shareholder value.**
- **Not-for-profit organisations are likely to give more weight to efficiency, effectiveness and matters of equity and community outcomes.**

It is important to think about potential challenges at this stage. The probability of a venture's failure and any potential financial losses, brand or corporate impacts should also be weighed up at this point - this includes reputational risks.

Delivering quality Forest School provision should help mitigate these risks (consider working towards FSA Recognised Forest School Provider status from the start).

[Link to information on the Recognised Forest School Provider scheme](#)

Working thorough the risks carefully at an early stage can save you time, effort and heartbreak later. At the FSA we are sometimes asked to give advice on situations where decision makers want to modify or change the delivery of quality Forest School. This is often caused by a lack of commitment to the process or a lack of understanding of the practicalities of delivery. Assumptions and presumptions at this stage may cause critical failures later. Good communication is important and you will need to be well prepared to answer questions relating to the stakeholders' specific interests. Creating a draft proposal or business plan may help with this.

Don't forget the other stakeholders that could be affected by your plans. Neighbours and landowners in particular need to be 'on board' from the start or you risk facing problems later on.



Step 5. Implementation

Once you have discovered that Forest School is right for you or your setting you will need to plan how you get it. This is called an implementation plan.

Just like the other sections in this booklet, care here can prevent your Forest School project from running into problems later.

We think that there are four critical areas that you should consider for your Forest school implementation plan:

- 1. Business planning**
- 2. Find the right trainer**
- 3. Create and maintain a handbook**
- 4. Future proofing**

1. Business planning

Business planning is not usually covered in Forest School training but is a topic that is critical for your success and is an area in which Forest School leaders sometimes struggle. It is not enough to be an excellent Forest School leader if you hope to not only keep your clients satisfied but also make a living.

Your Forest School provision needs to sit within an organisational structure. This may be a pre-existing one such as a school or a nursery. However, if you are setting up a new business then you will need to decide how this will be constituted.

You may need to explore different business structures and their strengths and weaknesses.

Common Forest School business structures are: sole trader, partnership, or a form of limited company. There are several forms of limited company: a company limited by shares, a limited partnership, a company limited by guarantee and a CIC (Community Interest Company). Your structure will reflect your core beliefs and steer your provision with specific statements of intent, constitutions, memorandum of association and mission statements. It may also change the way you can use any surplus or profit your business creates and affect the ownership of equipment, dissolution of the company or modify the amount of personal risk.



A business plan is often required by banks and other lenders but is in any case a very sensible document to produce. It will help you to develop and refine your thinking and plan exactly what you need to do: What resources and capabilities do you need? Who are your customers? Will you be able to maintain a positive cash flow? What will help differentiate you from others? The FSA Recognised Forest School Provider status may help.



RECOGNISED

Forest School Provider

www.forestschoolassociation.org

There are plenty of short courses available for small business owners that offer the basic knowledge and skills to plan your new venture and administer it correctly.



2. Finding the right trainer

The next part of your implementation plan will be to find a trainer. As with all training there are a variety of styles and quality. The FSA recommends our Endorsed Trainers. All FSA Endorsed Trainers' courses will prepare you well for the role of Forest School practitioner and the qualification is accepted as part of your application for FSA Recognised Provider Status. Our Endorsed Trainers have undergone a rigorous and extensive quality assurance program. You can find a list of all our Endorsed Trainers on our web page – [Link to find an FSA Endorsed Trainer](#)



Endorsed
Forest School
Trainer

www.forestschoolassociation.org



3. Creating a handbook

Whether you are a freelance leader or you are delivering as part of a school or organisation you will need to create a Forest School handbook. Creating a handbook will be covered at length in your training course by a quality trainer and although often seen as a daunting task it is your opportunity to communicate how you do Forest School and will give you confidence in your delivery. The handbook covers all your basic processes, policies and operational procedures, and will inform people of their rights and responsibilities e.g. safeguarding, terms and conditions etc.

4. Future proofing

As we are all aware the future is not solid and can change with a moment's notice. This final section is about reflecting on the culture surrounding your Forest School and managing change. None of us has a crystal ball but we can look at different areas of our Forest School in line with our wider community and look for where futures challenges and opportunities might lie.

You will also find it useful to work out your tipping points, the points at which the project becomes non-viable or needs to evolve into something else. These may be difficult to look at right now but will save a lot of heartaches later if you do.

To help navigate through this tricky section we have provided a few common issues that come up regularly from Forest School leaders who have found themselves in a bind and needed support from the FSA.

- **Forest School site changes - land use agreements or landowner relationships**
- **Bureaucratic changes – needing to register with Ofsted or a change of use for a site**
- **Mission Creep – clients attempting to change parameters of agreements e.g. reducing session time or amounts, increasing numbers of children**
- **Communication issues – unhelpful presumptions about the Forest School practice and ethos**
- **Motivational or cognitive load – can you manage alone or will you burn out?**
- **Relationship changes – complaints from neighbours, staff or parents about your delivery.**

A few final things for you to consider

In this final section we address some more of the common questions that are regularly raised during enquiries with the FSA.



Land Tenure and Use

Having somewhere to run Forest School is obviously very important. There are several different options in securing a site depending on your circumstances.

These may include:

- **Freehold** – ownership of a site by titling
- **Leasehold** - long term lease of a site from the owner through a legal agreement or contract that often lasts 40 years plus
- **Community Land Trust (CLT)** – are Trusts set up to manage housing or land that is important to the community
- **Common or communal ownership** - the ownership of land by a community so that each member has a right to use it or part of it.
- **Private land rental** – renting from a private land owner

It is also useful to think about what permissions, covenants and agreements might be on the site you wish to use before you tie yourself into an agreement. You may find restrictions on fire use, storage or structures, camping, loos, or vehicular access. Tree safety inspections are also likely to be needed.

Equipment

The most important piece of kit other than your site, is you. With your imagination and enthusiasm, learners will thrive. Every Forest School session is different and each group of learners is unique so a universal kit list is impossible. However, there is a useful reflection exercise that will help you decide on what kit you need for your Forest School. Here are three questions you might want to reflect upon before you part with your hard-earned cash:

Do I need the equipment because of Health and Safety?

This question will help you create a ***must-have list*** to keep learners safe. It should include Shelter (from the weather), fire (the ability to make/provide a hot drink/food or warm a person), clothing (extra kit to keep unprepared learners warm/dry), First Aid, PPE, including evacuation equipment and provision of toilets and handwashing, phone or walkie-talkies.

Do I need the equipment to promote learning opportunities?

This question could help create an ever-changing list, dependent on the learners' needs. Some basic provisions will facilitate a lot of learning, e.g. rope, string, natural resources, tools, pots and pans, water, field guide sheets, magnifiers and cardboard tubes etc. It is also helpful to think about: How often will the object be used? Can you maintain it? Can you transport it to site? Does it need specialist skills or training to use? Do you have the right skills/knowledge? Will it prevent a learning opportunity? Do you have the correct insurance cover for the tool or activity it is related too?

Select the button below for updates about the FSA's upcoming book on setting up a Forest school

Update Me!

Do I need the equipment to create a comfortable / usable space for learners?

This list will be dependent on your site or setting and may include toileting and privacy, seating, hammocks or nets. It may also cover how equipment is transported or stored. Often items on this list will also appear in the other two lists e.g. a comfortable kneeling mat may appear in Health and Safety in response to a risk assessment as well as providing a dry seat.

'Whatever direction you take and whatever circumstances you find yourself in; being in the woods with a group of other humans, following their interests, scaffolding and supporting their learning is such an inspiring process. There is always something surprising to discover about the participant's perspectives and ideas. There is always something to learn about the environment around us. Nurturing the relationship between the two and seeing the holistic growth that Forest School promotes is so key to the role of a Forest School leader.' *Lily Horseman FSA Director and FSA Chair*

If you have enjoyed this booklet, why not join the FSA? If you are about to start training and you choose one of our FSA Endorsed Trainers don't forget you can get a 50% reduction in FSA membership for your first year. Membership gives you access to our seminars, knowledge base, members news and member discounts.

We would love you to share this document on your website. [Find out the best ways you can do this on our Webpage.](#)



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