

Young Shoots: an evaluation of subsidised outdoor learning training

Becky Wilkinson and **Fiona Groves** evaluate the impact of a project that provided subsidised Outdoor Learning Practitioner training, specifically around improved skills to lead sessions with children in formal and informal education settings.

The skills of foresters, woodland managers and arborists have never been in greater demand (Forestry Skills Forum, 2021), yet we live in an age where the younger generation are worryingly disconnected from the natural world. A generation of children who do not routinely go into the woods or other natural spaces experience poorer physical and mental health, separated from the benefits that a woodland can bring. Such disconnect is not only detrimental to children but leaves them lacking in ecological awareness and understanding of the need for skilled stewardship of our woods and forests (Louv, 2019; Walsh, 2017). In the Children's People and Nature Survey (2022) conducted by Natural England, only 27% of the children surveyed had recently spent time in a wood or forest and only 23% had recently taken part in any form of outdoor learning at school (other than PE). RFS Education Officers routinely meet children who have never been into a woodland before, who lack the language to name any of the trees around them or their features and who don't know that our native woodlands no longer have bears and wolves. For our sector to have the workforce that it needs for the future, as well as a public who understands our role and the importance of well managed British woodlands, we need more children to learn in and learn about forests.

Terms of reference

This study looks at the impact of funding that was provided to the Forest Education Network for England (FENE) from

the Forestry Commission through the Government's Nature for Climate Fund. The Royal Forestry Society managed the project on behalf of FENE and it had two core objectives:

- To equip professionals working with children with the skills and confidence to take groups into local woodlands for learning activities.
- To contribute to tackling the skills gap in the forestry sector by training up a new cohort of practitioners competent to work in woodland settings and to inspire the next generation through positive woodland experiences.

The project began in November 2022 with training taking place during February and March 2023. Evaluations and participant interviews took place between June to September 2023 to allow time for skills to be practiced and for initial impact to be evaluated.

The funding allowed participants to undertake a Level 2, externally accredited course in Curriculum Based Outdoor Learning (CBOL), equipping successful trainees to become Outdoor Learning Practitioners. Participants were required to pay £50 rather than the full cost of £250, a fee intended to reduce the chance of participants registering without commitment to complete the training and deter people who were not intending to use it in their professional practice. The training was provided by Cambium Sustainable,

selected as a network of trainers capable of delivering the same course across nine locations in England at only four to five months' notice. Details of the course can be found at Cambium Sustainable Ltd (2023).

Alongside the training for practitioners, a set of five training videos were created to reinforce knowledge about forest education gained through the training courses. Project timescales meant that these videos were unfortunately not available prior to the training but all trainees were sent them after their face-to-face training and they have now been embedded into the syllabus for future cohorts.

Methodology

The training was run using a blended model with participants given a number of online units to work through before attending a face-to-face training day with their tutor and the other nine trainees at their centre. Of 90 places offered, 83 trainees completed both the online and face-to-face components. This is comparable with Cambium's internal statistics on the proportion of trainees who complete both aspects of other similar courses. The reasons for the seven people who did not complete included ill health, changes by their employer, and poor weather leading to a change of date of one of the face-to-face courses.

An evaluation of the impact of the training was carried out by Fiona Groves, a consultant engaged by FENE with considerable experience in the sector but independent from Cambium Sustainable Ltd. Trainees were asked to share details of their role, place of work and previous experience at the time of booking and were then asked to complete a short questionnaire after completing their training to draw out aspects of their experience and what was learnt from the training. Of the 83 trainees who completed all aspects of the training, 38 responded to the

questionnaire giving a response rate of 46%. In addition, interviews with organisers, trainers and sample case studies have taken place.

Who participated in the training?

The funding reached two broad groups of people; those who wanted to take children out for learning in woodland spaces but who were not yet doing so and those who already had some experience but lacked qualifications in outdoor learning. Of the 83 trainees, 39 places were taken by school staff, either teachers or teaching assistants. Of those, the majority were from mainstream education settings, six represented schools for pupils with Special Educational Needs, one was from a Secondary School and one was from a Further Education College. Of the remaining 44 places, 23 or almost a third of total places, were taken by staff working in the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS), i.e. provision for children aged four and under. The difference in representation between younger and older age groups is stark. Although it is outside of the scope of this study to explore the reasons for the difference, it does have potential implications for future work in this area, ensuring that the staff who teach young people during the ages when they are making crucial career and subject choices are suitably skilled to take those children out into local woodlands rather than only learning about them from inside a classroom.

What skills did the participants gain?

Trainee experience prior to the training was very varied, with 38% stating that they had little or no experience of outdoor learning and only 5% of the trainees saying that they were very experienced and had run their own outdoor learning sessions (Table 1). When they were asked "How experienced would you say you were in outdoor learning before the training?" and "How experienced would you

Table 1. Changes in experience before and after the training

Description of experience before course	Number of people (also expressed as %)		
	Before course	After course	Change
Very experienced – I have run my own outdoor learning	2 (5)	5 (13)	+3 (+8)
Experienced – I am confident in delivering outdoor learning	6 (16)	23 (61)	+17 (+45)
Somewhat experienced – I have practised outdoor learning activities	16 (42)	8 (21)	-8 (-21)
A little experience – I am familiar with outdoor learning practice	11 (29)	2 (5)	-9 (-24)
Inexperienced	3 (8)	0 (0)	-3 (-8)
Total	38 (100)	38 (100)	

say you are now in outdoor learning after the training?”, it was clear that there was a positive shift in experience, with an increase of 20 people (53%) describing themselves as experienced or very experienced after the training. The greatest change was seen in the ‘experienced’ category, with a 45% increase in that after training. Only two participants considered themselves to still have only little experience. In the ‘comments’ section of the evaluation questionnaire one participant noted “I have a much better understanding of outdoor learning and ideas of activities that can be done than what I had before. Especially without much prior experience in e.g. planning sessions start to end.”

When asked to rate “I was given the opportunity to gain knowledge and practice new skills”, all but one (97%) of the survey respondents either ‘strongly agreed’ or ‘agreed’ with the statement (Figure 1). They were also asked “What was most gained from the training” and asked to rank six statements about learning outcomes as shown in the box in Figure 1. This shows that 50% of trainees felt the most important thing they gained was practical ideas for current and future work. The rankings also show that developing an increase in confidence and understanding of outdoor learning themes as equal second rating, with 21% expressing that this was most important for each of the two outcomes.

This supports the intentions of the training with the top three ranked learning outcomes according well with the funding aims. Gaining confidence came out as a strong theme throughout and was demonstrated in many additional comments given by participants. Good examples were provided with supporting comments such as: “I now have the confidence to actively plan and deliver more

outdoor learning activities with the children in my setting” and “My confidence and enthusiasm levels were greatly improved as a result of this course.”

What evidence is there of impact upon the next generation?

This is harder to evidence within the scope of this study and the resources available to us for conducting the evaluation. There was a range of positive feedback from survey respondents about how they were implementing their training but we did not have the resources to speak to the children they were working with to understand their learning about and connection with trees, woods and forests (Figure 2). What we do know is that the training enabled practitioners to take children into woodlands or wooded areas who were not doing so before, and from among those who were already doing some work outside that they were now more confident to include specific teaching about woodland ecosystems. Comments that support this include the following:

“The ideas that Sarah gave us for future lessons and activities were amazing. I have so many new ideas to try out with the children. Also, starting to understand about the local flora and fauna.”

“I’m more confident with identification, e.g. I now understand how to look for clues on deciduous trees during the dormant season.”

“I have applied some of the practical ideas with children for example the layers of woods”

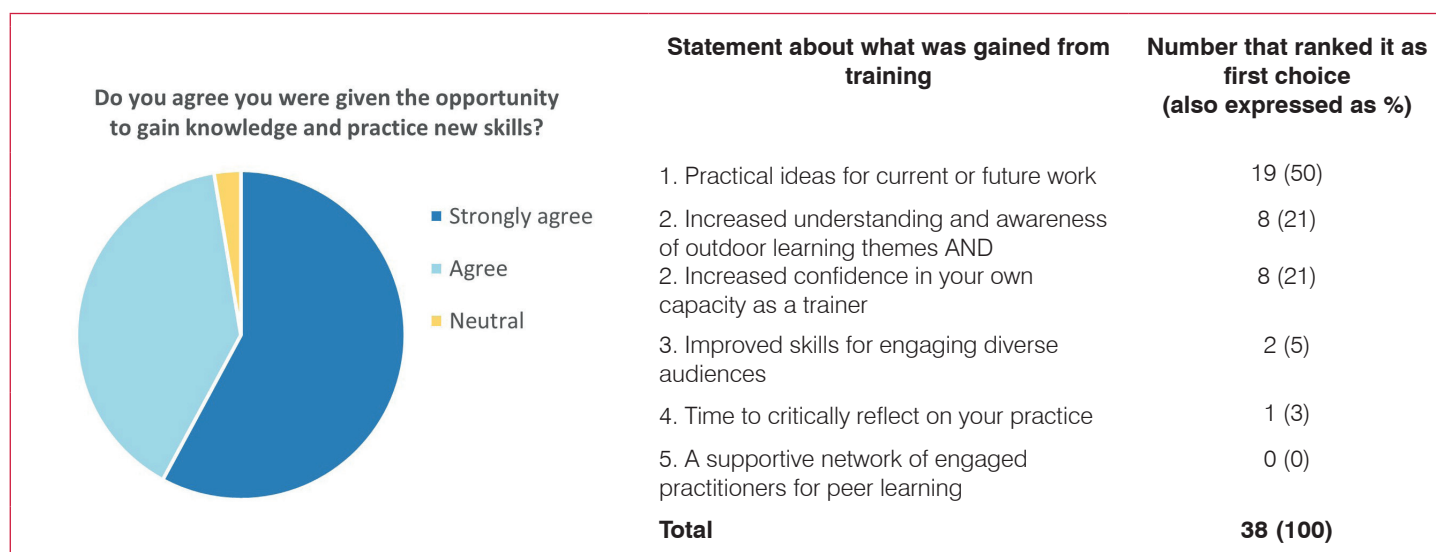


Figure 1. Development and practice of knowledge, skills and confidence.



Figure 2. A selection of the activities that children undertake in woodlands during outdoor learning.
 Left: Investigating colour in a woodland (Photo: Sam Goddard, Cambium Sustainable Ltd).
 Top right: Labelling parts of a tree. Bottom right: Woodland writing.

“The course gave me more ideas of things to try in my setting and to pass on to my team. It also taught me a lot about biodiversity which I am now putting into practice.”

Some respondents also identified that they now felt more confident in completing risk assessments for learning activities in woodlands, crucial for both increasing the likelihood that visits take place and ensuring safety when the group are in the woodland.

What difference did the funding make?

When asked “What motivated you to apply for this training in outdoor learning?” 61% of survey respondents indicated that the grant availability was in their top three reasons. It was also clear that the subsidy on the training course had been a major factor in attracting the trainees based on their written comments in the course evaluation. Examples are shown below:

“I don’t think my setting would have afforded to pay a full amount for me to undertake this course.”

“Without that funding, there’s no way I could have afforded to do the course. As a self-employed childminder, I couldn’t have afforded to put myself through the course normally. I’m really grateful for that funding.”

“It is unlikely I would have been able to do the course at all if the funding had not made it more affordable for my employer.”

“It is not something I would budget for on my minimum casual wage.”

“Normally a course like this would be £200 or something. To have it much cheaper made me able to make the commitment to apply for it.”

“I felt able to ask my employer to fund it as it was so heavily subsidised.”

Conclusions and implications for future projects

- **There is demand for training around working with children and young people in woodlands.**
 Despite all of the vast range of training opportunities out there for educators, there is clearly an appetite for training around taking children into woodlands for outdoor learning. Cost is one important factor in making this training accessible to a wide audience but not the only one, participants also value training in their locality and the opportunity to learn with and from fellow professionals.
- **Given the confidence and skills to do so, educators will engage in forest education with their groups.**
 Attention therefore needs to be given to how to further remove barriers to forest education, not just to promoting its benefits.

- ***Specific solutions need to be trialled for professionals working with the 11-16 age group.***
At an age when young people are making crucial decisions about which courses to study and careers to aspire to, it could be argued that young people are most at need of opportunities for forest education. This project did not reach practitioners working with this age group as successfully as it did for younger age groups and the reasons for this will need to be explored when planning future interventions.
- ***Further research is needed on the impact of training upon children who indirectly benefit from it.***
There is very little research available among the wider body of literature about the long-term impact of environmental education upon the recipients of it. This was outside the scope of this study but more work of this nature could have important implications for the design of training provision.

This article is a summary of the main findings from the evaluation. If you would like to know about the full evaluation, please contact Becky Wilkinson.

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