

RFS Award - Forestry in the Community

Sarah Lawfull reports on this new RFS Award and a pilot project in Leicester that has examined how to work with the education community to ensure its success.

Thanks to generous funding from the ALA Green Charitable Trust, thirty teenagers facing barriers to education have been learning about forestry through a pilot project that will see them awarded the Level 1 Award in Forestry in the Community. The qualification, designed by the RFS and accredited by AIM Qualifications (AIM, 2024), opens up paths of interest and opportunities for future work or study in forestry and arboriculture, countryside management, agriculture or forest education.

Evidence of learning is collated in an e-portfolio, avoiding students needing to write; they can provide photographs, audio journals, and videos alongside tutor observations. The award's four units promote confidence, achievement and increased self-worth through learning in and caring for a woodland. Each unit is worth one credit and requires ten guided learning hours:

- Managing Risk in a Woodland Environment
- Woodland Plants and Animals
- Woodland Management
- Forestry in the Community

This award creates purposeful real-world experiences with opportunities to meet and work alongside foresters and wildlife rangers to discover new strengths and interests. It allows the school to observe students as they learn to keep themselves safe, make curriculum links and meet personal, social, physical, moral and spiritual development targets.

Pilot project in Leicester

In this project I have worked with the existing Forest Foxes partnership of the National Forest and Leicester City in the Community (LCitC). The project has explored delivery models and trialled different approaches before registering

learners with the Awarding Body. We have accommodated the ongoing difficulties facing schools post-pandemic, including low staffing levels, curriculum timetabling, and increased anxiety among young people.

Creating a team teaching approach with Forest School leaders as course tutors, working alongside teaching and specialist support staff in the woods and back in the classroom, is helping us overcome the difficulties of evidencing practical learning and embedding the woodland experience in the curriculum. Linking the highly motivating learning happening outdoors with literacy and IT, for example, tells the students that this work is valuable and provides a real purpose for studying indoors.

AIM Qualifications and Assessment Group welcomes and supports our creative and flexible teaching and the learning and assessment models that have been



Learners are encouraged to undertake active work in their local area, thinking about how woods can be managed for a variety of uses including public access.

developed because they want more young people to achieve this fantastic qualification. Fabienne Bailey of AIM Qualifications and Assessment Group says they are “delighted to be working in collaboration with approved centres...Working directly with organisations such as Where The Fruit Is to support the Royal Forestry Society aims of sharing knowledge on the art and science of woodland management. Together, we are proud to support green and sustainable skills training that increase the public understanding of Forestry in the Community.”

Benefits of the award

Becky Wilkinson of the RFS wrote the qualification to meet the needs of the forestry sector and young people who find mainstream school difficult. Her in-depth knowledge of the challenges faced by these learners and the often complex stories each one is living made her the ideal person to pioneer this systemic response to their needs, whilst working towards building a community of learners engaging with forestry.

The impact of spending time in woodlands on well-being is well-documented; research in Japan has convinced scientists and policymakers of the holistic health benefits of forest bathing and other therapeutic approaches. Goodenough and Waite's (2020) comprehensive meta-analysis of research projects, *Wellbeing from Woodland*, shows that planting trees and

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Becky Wilkinson explaining the value of thinning to two Forest School leaders at Woodside Lodge.



Making willow bird feeders.

nurturing young woodlands affords biophilic wellbeing to the young people involved.

This qualification arrives on the education scene when many schools are struggling with poor attendance. According to NHS statistics published in November 2023, about one in five children and young people aged 8 to 25 years has a probable mental disorder. An increasing number of young people are joining waiting lists for mental health support, with 54% of young people aged 17-25 reporting being worried about climate change (NHS, 2023).

Meaningful work that addresses habitat loss and offers opportunities to develop mastery in coppicing and creating dead hedges brings a sense of connection with the past and, according to Goodenough and Waite (2020), grants “them access to a collective social and psychological identity – practical and productive managers of the natural environment.”

We anticipated getting young people qualified within three to six months. However, time and experience in Phase One of the pilot project have shown us that a full academic year is needed for the skilled Forest School practitioners to thread woodland management tasks through the seasons, work with individuals to address any sensory issues, build students' resilience, confidence, and competency with the tools, and learn about the lifecycles and ecology of the woodland species.

Several schools we had hoped to work with only allowed an hour in the woods each week, so we changed tack and

found settings already committed to offering Forest School aligned with the ethos and principles as agreed by the Forest School community (Forest School, 2011).

It takes time to achieve learning outcomes and assessment criteria, such as safe tool use and practical woodland management tasks like tree planting, building bird boxes, and improving areas within a woodland. These young people need sessions that allow for calm transitions and provide sufficient time to engage meaningfully in a task, learn from mistakes, and bounce back from setbacks.

Examples of implementation

Woodside Lodge Outdoor Learning Centre (Woodside Lodge, 2023) is a specialist alternative provision focusing on the unique benefits of learning outside the classroom. Their Forest School leader, Tom Kirkby, was keen to engage with this qualification from the start of the project. He has seen it add a new dynamic of learning to his students, “showing them that understanding everything in nature is not needed to progress, allowing them to challenge themselves with something they may never have thought was possible” and that forestry is “something they might pursue a career in.”

His students have commented that being in the woods helps them feel calm and more able to engage with others, focusing on projects together and feeling at one with nature. One young person

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Laying wool mulch around a newly planted sapling.



Sarah Lawfull, Becky Wilkinson and Tom Kirkby sharing their vision for the pilot at Woodside Lodge.

eloquently said that the Forest School site they are learning to manage is a place for students to come if they are having a hard time, to be away from school, connecting and interacting with nature in a way that suits them and at their own pace. They also commented that spending time caring for the woodland helped them find meaning, and they were more able to direct themselves to a “better physical and mental part of their life”. Understanding the benefits of woodlands for people is a key learning outcome of the qualification.

Raj Bual, teacher and Forest School leader at Dovetree School (Dovetree School, 2023) explains the value of this accredited qualification, providing a “platform to demonstrate academic pupil progress, meaningful conversations with social workers, care homes, parents/ carers” and demonstrating the value of time learning in the woods to governors and directors. He notes how it enables Forest School to have some weight on the senior school pupils’ timetables as qualifications loom, noting that “time is valuable within a specialist provision like ours”. The teams of adults working within each of the pilot’s final three schools deeply understand the importance of discovery learning and a flexible strengths and needs-based learner-centred approach, responding to the young people’s interests and how they present on each occasion.

By placing the learner at the heart of the qualification, we are building their sense of agency, helping them

become forestry literate, future stewards of our woodlands, “empowering them to make a positive difference to both their own and nature’s future” (DfE, 2024).

Pupils at Dovetree are thriving and have had their eyes opened by the prospect of qualifications and potential job roles within the woodlands – an area of the school site they enjoy. The prospect of future qualifications has meant funding has been allocated to forest education, opening more doors for the students.

Planning for the future

Dr Alex Evans (Leicester City in the Community’s Environmental Sustainability Coordinator) led the scoping phase of the pilot and is now working to widen the reach of the qualification within their network of secondary schools

in Leicester. He says “It has been gratifying to see young people who naturally flourish outdoors be allowed to develop their practical skills and knowledge in a recognised award. We’ve seen the learners grow in confidence using tools to look after their own green spaces, identifying how

to make the area safe for visitors and respect the variety of plants and animals that call the woods their home.”

Dr Evans believes this qualification will contribute to LCiC’s ongoing ‘education for employment’ offer. It will be

accessible to young carers and looked-after teenagers, especially those who learn most effectively outside a school classroom or mainstream education.

Beth Tocker, Assistant Head at our third school, Forest Way (Forest Way, 2023), sees this as an “unmissable

“We are helping learners to become forestry literate, future stewards of our woodlands.”



Learners use a variety of resources during their work for the award.



The Forest Way School site – young people will be engaged in caring for this site, planting new trees, and working with the team to improve habitats, paths, etc.



Sarah Lawfull and Becky Wilkinson.

opportunity for those on our vocational pathway to gain a qualification and do this meaningfully, developing key skills and inspiration for future job opportunities.” She notes “the strength of this pilot is building connections between alternative provisions (i.e. education for pupils with needs not met in the mainstream) and SEND (special education needs and disabilities) schools to develop the qualification and influence the creation of a truly inclusive qualification for young people”.

We are building a healthy ecosystem that will plant and grow young foresters as we promote biodiversity and support each other to explore ways of making this qualification accessible to a broader audience. We look forward to presenting the first qualification certificates to some of these young people this summer, knowing that this may be their first taste of academic success.

As ‘digital natives’, these young people enjoy finding ways to bring technology into the woodlands to identify species, map the sites and record their learning. Drawing on the Forest Education Network England (FENE) resource hub hosted by the RFS and links with network members such as the Birmingham Institute of Forest Research (BIFoR), we can show how modern science and technology improve species outcomes and help us manage our sites well.

Often quoted, these words of David Attenborough seem appropriate, “No one will protect what they don’t care about, and no one will care about what they have never experienced.”

Learning about, in, and through sustainable woodland management is an enjoyable experience. For some, it may be the start of a lifelong career in forestry, and for others, it may provide the soil for a healthy, sustainable life where woodlands provide sustenance, a place to be well, and to restore – all excellent outcomes.

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Sarah Lawfull runs Where The Fruit Is, a nature-based coaching and training consultancy; she is Chair of the Forest School Association and co-founder and co-chair of the Nature Premium campaign. With over 30 years of experience teaching and working in voluntary youth work, she advocates for person-centred regenerative education and autism-friendly practice, believing that when environments work for autistic people, they work for everyone. Her passion for teaching sustainable woodland management as part of quality Forest School training grew from professional links with the Sylva Foundation and a lifetime love of trees, wildflowers and ‘weeds’.

Email: sarah@wherethefruitis.co.uk