



**FOREST
EDUCATION
NETWORK**
ENGLAND

Developing a woodland space for educational access



www.rfs.org.uk/fene



Developing a woodland space for educational access

The purpose of this document is to provide guidance for woodland owners considering opening up their space for educational access. Offering support for safe practices and practical suggestions to get you up and running.

Two reports published by Natural England in 2022 demonstrated that high quality learning outside of the classroom in natural environments can deliver a wide array of positive health and learning outcomes.

Whether it is for schools or community groups, woodlands provide wonderful natural settings for children and young people to play, explore, discover, learn and gain real life experiences. Not only can these experiences support the development of new skills and knowledge, they are great for physical, personal and mental development. These experiences can provide a grounding for pro-environmental behaviour in later life and support health and wellbeing.

Learning outside can be delivered in low cost ways, this document will lead you through all the things to consider whether you are wishing to offer ad hoc sessions or regular all year round activities.

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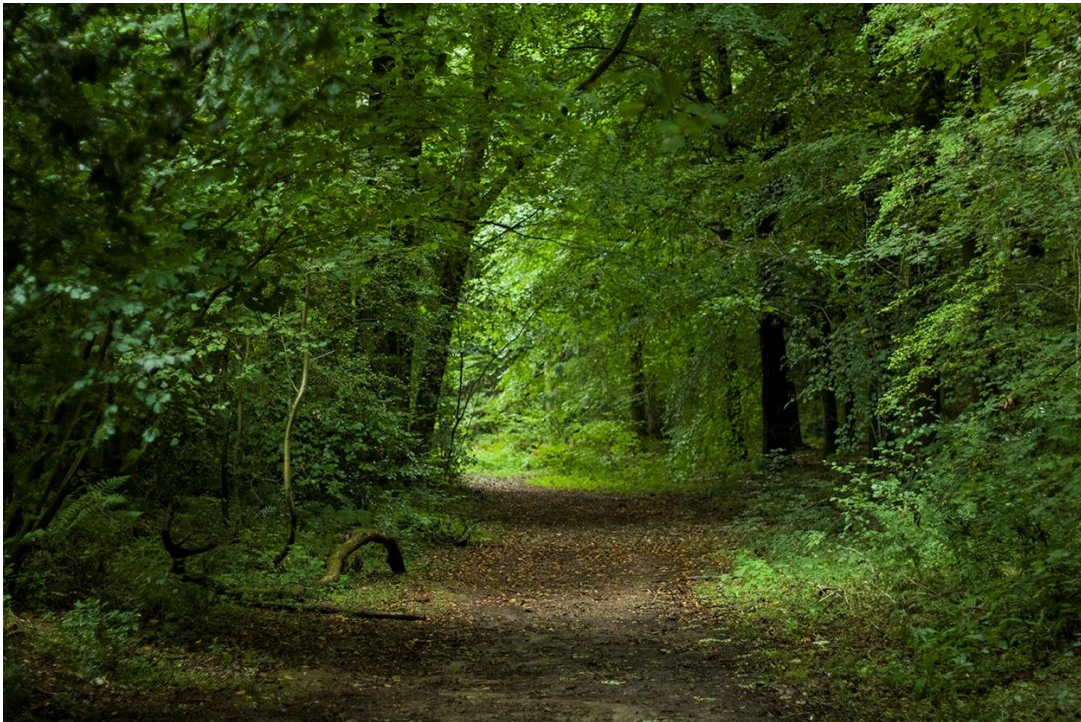
For activity ideas to do in your woodland space visit our resource hub at [Forest Education Network \(England\) - Royal Forestry Society \(rfs.org.uk\)](https://www.rfs.org.uk/fene)



1. Choosing a Site

In this section, we'll start by looking at how you can assess your woodland's potential as an educational space. You might have multiple areas within a woodland block or several woodlands to choose from. Therefore, it's wise to conduct a simple audit of each, to help determine the most suitable site.

Outdoor learning can be delivered for low or no cost so before embarking on building infrastructure consider what it is you wish to offer, to who and for how long. Preparing for the occasional visiting group brings different considerations to offering regular all year round activities. You may also need to consider if groups are self leading their own activities or if you will be offering guided experiences.



Credit Royal Forestry Society

Consider your woodland management objectives

Knowing what the future plans are for your woodland will enable you to consider where and when you can access it with a group. Consider:

- Are there areas of your woodland where access won't be impacted in the near future by planting, harvesting or other processes?



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- Does your site have any designations such as Sites of Special Scientific Interest, Ancient Monuments or Tree Preservation Orders that may need to be considered in planning? Any protected species such as badgers, newts or bats and nesting birds?
- How will access from educational groups work alongside other woodland users e.g. those on Public Rights of Way as well as commercial uses such as shoots or charcoal making?

Access into the woodland

Schools and groups with children under the age of 16 may be reluctant to park by the side of the road and walk into a woodland on a busy road if there is no pavement present due to risk from passing motorists.

Consider your options around parking, turning spaces, dropping off and picking up points so that you are clear to visiting groups what their transport options are and you are able to give clear instructions before their visit..

Is the site accessible to:

- Coaches
- Minibuses (Usually 2 for a class of 30 children)
- Cars? If so, how many?
- Visitors arriving on foot / by bike

Once on site, vehicles will need a place to park, preferably some form of hard standing if your site is going to be used regularly throughout the year. If you plan to use an existing area, make sure it is safe for children. This should be a low use area without potential hazards such as machinery, livestock or high traffic flow. If there are hazards, how can measures be put in place to keep visitors safe whilst on site.

If you are planning to create new parking areas, you may wish to consider permeable paving or grass reinforcement systems to reduce the environmental impact and provide safe and durable access.

Access around your site

Take into consideration the audience you wish to invite. Having a long distance to walk or uneven terrain may not be very inclusive and exclude those with physical needs, wheel or push chairs users.



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Think about:

- How will the topography of your site affect access and usability by groups?
- Are there any natural or man-made hazards which you wish to avoid such as steep drops, lakes, busy roads etc?
- What is the terrain like underfoot?

For example, if the site is located at the top of a steep incline, far from the parking space for the minibuss, you will find that groups, especially younger children, will struggle to access it. This can lead to an extended period of time getting to the site rather than actually being there. Young children get tired easily and not all of your groups will be used to walking long distances on uneven ground.

A space to gather

Much of the experience of learning and education in a woodland can be spread out, exploring different areas and enjoying the space. Groups will need to safely stand, sit down, squat, be quiet and move around. It is useful to have spaces where groups can come together to discuss, share ideas or enjoy refreshments. Looking for open spaces, glades and clearings which lend themselves to groups coming together is a good first step.

When choosing a 'learning' area and gathering space in your woodland consider what learning opportunities the area offers? Is it near to a range of interesting



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woodland flora and fauna? What will they be able to see from where they are? Or within a 5 minute walk? Are there any unwanted distractions? Will it require seating or shelter from the elements?.

A gathering space before entering the woodland can sometimes also be useful to introduce yourself and quickly explain the programme for the day and what to be careful of e.g. health and safety talk before heading into the woodland.

Creating New Woodland

If you are interested in creating new woodland on your land, for future educational visits, seek professional advice. This can be a valuable long-term project and you can involve groups in the planting, aftercare and learning about the new woodland. And make the most out of the potential space as a learning resource.

A guide to planning new woodland

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/618e79658fa8f503764ed2cf/A_Guide_to_Planning_New_Woodland_in_England_V1.0_Nov2021.pdf

Further Reading

Making a trackway in a woodland

<https://www.woodlands.co.uk/blog/practical-guides/woodland-tracks-and-paths/>

Access, tracks and boundaries

<https://www.woodlands.co.uk/owning-a-wood/tracks-and-gates/>

Visitor access and engagement

<https://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/media/50673/woodland-trust-woodland-creation-guide.pdf>

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2. Before your first visitors

Now you've decided which area within your woodland you're going to use for your educational visits, it's time to think about how your groups will use it and what activities will be on offer. It's important to think about the site itself as well as how this new use could impact the flora and fauna. You also need to consider the needs of your groups and how the health and safety of all other users will be maintained.

Land Use

You may need to contact your local council to discuss the correct land use designation for educational visits. Seek professional guidance from an independent planning consultant for support with this.

Talk to any neighbours or other users of the land who could be affected if the site will get a lot of use, keeping them happy can foster good relationships and ensure everyone is happy with the increased access and additional visiting vehicles.

Woodland and planning legislation
<https://www.woodlands.co.uk/owning-a-wood/woodlands-and-planning-legislation/>

Insurance

You will need to ensure you have public liability insurance for your land which covers the types of activities that will be taking place.



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Training

Consider what training may be required for the person running the activities. Check what experience they have and / or certificates to demonstrate they have the skills and knowledge when working with children.

Tree Safety

Before you start using your woodland for educational visits, you'll need to get a tree survey done on the trees to ensure (as far as possible) that they are safe and are not going to harm anyone. This needs to be carried out by an arboriculturist or forester with a qualification in tree inspections and surveys. You may search for a contractor using: [Arboricultural Association - ARB Approved Contractor Directory \(trees.org.uk\)](http://trees.org.uk).

This survey will look at individual trees and any risks they pose. Remember to survey not just the identified learning / gathering space but the access routes in and out of the woodland. The surveyor will consider the health of the tree and any visible damage to the trunk, roots, branches and canopy; they will look for signs of pests, disease and fungi and write a report on this for you. It will probably suggest trees to monitor, it may suggest trees that could pose a risk.

If you can be on site when the tree survey takes place, it's worth showing the surveyor the site and any trees you are worried about. Talking to them afterwards will give you more information and you can ask questions about anything you are unsure of. You can also explain to them how you intend to use the site and the areas which will get the most frequent use.

Once visits are taking place, the woodland owner or the leader of any activity should check for any new concerns before every session, particularly after storms. It may be necessary to close educational access to your woodland in high winds.

Risk assessing trees in your learning area

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dRb94nJsaU4>

Risk assessing a woodland space before visit

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HiXZaML0sfU>



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Ecosystem Impact

The level of usage will need to be considered to avoid any unintended damage to the woodland environment. Impacts may include things like:

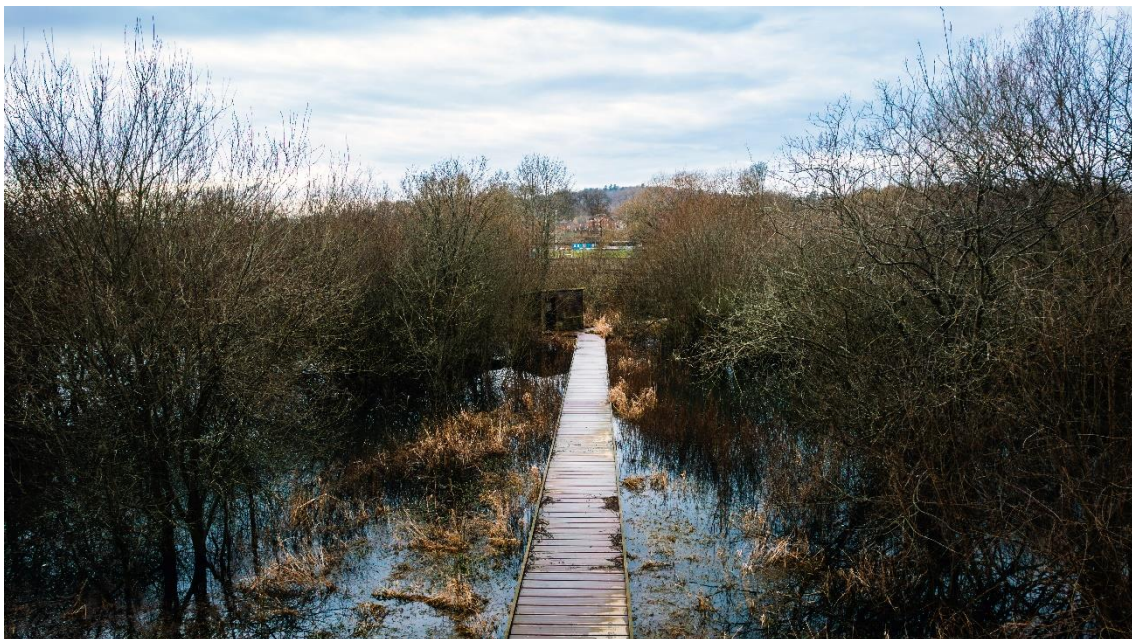
- Noise and disturbance of habitat
- Trampling and compaction of the soil
- Removing deadwood for fires or other activities
- Cutting of vegetation to improve access
- Using trees and shrubs for den building or shelters
- Bringing organic materials, live and dead, on to site. This can potentially spread disease
- Collection of live organic materials by groups
- Bringing non-organic materials onto site, especially plastics!
- Soil degradation linked to growing produce
- Uncollected rubbish, especially plastic and other non-composting waste

You may wish to consider:

Are there spaces in your woodland that you want to avoid?

Do you wish to avoid these areas all year round or at certain times of year to protect particular species or when the ground is at its wettest?

If so, how will you highlight this to your groups? It may be enough to talk to them about these areas, or you could mark them out with a visual sign such as a rope.



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3. Boundaries, Paths, and Signage

Boundaries

When planning your activities consider if the educational groups will have full access to your woodland? Do you wish to keep them to certain areas for their own safety, away from sensitive / unsafe areas or for the protection of the woodland ecosystem?

If your current boundaries include barbed wire or electric fencing, think about how this potential hazard can be communicated to people using the site, particularly in gateways or near uneven ground where someone may put a hand out to steady themselves.

Nettles and brambles can provide an effective natural boundary that children are unlikely to climb through. Where a boundary is needed, something as simple as a length of rope outlining the area in which the group are allowed to venture unaccompanied will be enough, or you could point out a landmark, or pop coloured tape around key trees to make sure the group know that is the boundary.

Dead-hedging is a cheap and effective way to install a visual boundary that can also act as a valuable habitat for woodland fauna. These can be built with brush from the woodland itself and constructed with older groups if appropriate.



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Paths

Rides and tracks which are suitable for adults who are used to being in a woodland may not be suitable for children, particularly if they are very young. Low branches and overhanging vegetation after wet weather can cause potential harm if it is at eye height.



Credit Royal Forestry Society

Children's wellies are not that high for wading through puddles in gateways and they are easily sucked off in deep mud. Even if you have prewarned group leaders to ensure everyone is suitably dressed you will always have some children who will come in trainers, think about whether your paths are accessible to them. Chip can be helpful to reduce slipping and visually highlight pathways however it may not always be necessary. If you don't have your own chip, contact a local arborist, they may be happy to oblige.

Although nettles and brambles have their uses as boundaries, think if your paths are wide enough for groups of children to pass down them without brushing through the undergrowth at face or hand height? Children will often want to walk next to a friend or adult rather than in single file.

Depending on the terrain of your site, it may be necessary to construct raised sections such as boardwalks to help people move through thicker areas of understory or wetter areas. This can be especially important if there is ground flora or habitats that you want to preserve and protect. Bear in mind that these boardwalks can get very slippery over time, so think about installing a non-slip surface or wire mesh to mitigate this risk.

Safety Signage

If your woodland is being actively managed, signage to alert participants of these activities is essential.



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It is also important to consider signage to alert people of hazards both natural and man-made, for example, wet areas, ponds, steep banks, log stacks and machinery. Remember, people can become 'sign blind,' so avoid overwhelming the site with excessive signage. Ensure that signs are removed when they are no longer needed, such as after felling operations have ended.

Guidance on signage for public safety

<https://www.forestryengland.uk/sites/default/files/documents/Managingpublicsafetyonharvestingsites.pdf>

Educational Signage

If groups are conducting self guided visits to your woodland, signage can help them to understand a bit more about the woodland ecosystems, management, and history. Think about the educational value of any signage you plan to install and how it will add to the experience of those visiting your site.

When designing signage, use durable, sustainable, weather-resistant materials, ensuring longevity and minimal maintenance. You could incorporate QR codes or interactive elements on signs for a more immersive learning experience. Signage can explain some of the sustainable management techniques used in your woodland, highlighting areas of interest such as wetlands, fallen trees, dead hedges, coppicing, habitat areas and more.



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4. Temporary site facilities

If you are planning on providing ad hoc access to your woodland there are a number of low cost, temporary facilities options available to ensure a safe and welcoming learning environment.

Seating

It's good to have a gathering place in your woodland for the group to sit, leave any resources or return to if there is an emergency. Tarpaulins, gardening or camping mats can all be used to provide cheap temporary seating in woodlands that will not be used frequently.

Shelter

Having the option of shelter at your site is important to allow access in wet weather or to provide shade in hot sunny weather. For a temporary site, this can be as simple as a tarpaulin set up between two trees. Think about whether the shelter you have available is suitable for the group size. A 5m x 5m tarpaulin will shelter a class of 30 children but if they're going to want to move around under there or store equipment then you may need two or more.



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Once you have your shelter, you'll need to find a suitable spot to set it up. It's a good idea to practice before turning up with a group. Learn some simple knots that you can use to erect your shelter so you can quickly set it up if required. You could even make this a part of the session for older groups.



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Equipment

If you are taking educational resources into the woods or providing off ground storage for their bags, you may wish to purchase a trolley or find a suitable wheelbarrow. These should be heavy duty and robust, ideally with solid rather than inflatable wheels to avoid punctures.

Water

Think about whether the visiting groups will need to access water, both for drinking and handwashing. You could ask the groups to bring their own water, or you could buy a reusable 10 little water container and some reusable cups which can be carried up to the site each time you visit.



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Water; tippy tap what is it and how to make one

<https://healingwaters.org/what-is-a-tippy-tap-hand-washing-device/>

Toilets



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Provision for toileting is essential regardless of how infrequently you're going to be using the site. You will need to communicate with the staff that are accompanying the group before they arrive to discuss the toileting arrangements for the group. It can range from a potty to a pop up camping one through to compost options

Think about any suitable toilets you have available and if these can be accessed safely by your groups. For example, you may have a toilet in an outbuilding that the group could access before they walk to the woodland site. If it's a single toilet, will that be adequate for the group sizes that you are planning on inviting into your woodlands? Make sure it's clean and hygienic for your groups. If they want to use the toilet during a visit, how far does it take to get back there? Will an adult have to accompany them?

If you do not have a toilet in your site think about what type of temporary facilities you are going to provide. What arrangements will you need to make to maintain the dignity and privacy of all potential users? If you decide on building a latrine, will the waste drain away (it may be wise to dig a test pit) in a reasonable amount of time? You should make sure that any waste is kept as far as possible from all water courses. Follow local planning guidance on this.

Compost toilets

<https://freerangingdesigns.com/collections/compost-toilets>

Food and hygiene

Think about how your groups clean their hands before and after handling and eating food. Do you need to let visiting groups know that they will need to bring their own handwashing equipment or are you able to provide running water, soap and paper towels?

Anti-bacterial hand gel could also be provided for this purpose, but it doesn't replace running water and soap.

If providing food during your sessions, it is recommended that you gain the Basic Food Hygiene certificate and follow the guidelines from the Health and Safety Executive on storage and preparation of foodstuffs.

Food hygiene at outdoor events

<https://www.food.gov.uk/safety-hygiene/providing-food-at-community-and-charity-events>



5. Permanent Site Facilities

If you are intending to offer longer-term, regular visits to your woodland site, it may be useful to think about a more permanent site along with some structural work. This takes more investment of time, energy and money but can pay off in the long term and provide a solid base for year-round access.

Ground conditions

Sites in year-round use, with high visitor numbers or prone to staying water logged may benefit from the creation of stoned paths or the use of grass or mud mats to provide safer access out of the mud.

This can be useful for access as well as reducing damage to the underlying substrate.

Seating



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Permanent seating can range from a simple log circle or more elaborate seating arrangements. As with temporary sites, you'll need to think about the size of the group and how much seating they'll need. A typical class of 30 children, plus adults will require a log circle around 5m diameter. Logs should be staked into the ground to prevent them rolling and causing injury.



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Integrated seating can also be built into shelters and structures, providing a more permanent solution.

If you intend to have a fire in the centre of your seating area in the future, ensure there is adequate space to move around the seating area without tripping over people tending the fire or from the feet of the people sitting.

Shelters and Storage

Many sites operate year-round without a permanent structure for shelter. They're a nice to have but shouldn't be considered a barrier to opening your woodland for educational access if you don't have one.

Considerations when designing permanent shelters:

- Will planning permission be required? Consult your local authorities
- What is the prevailing wind and rain direction? Roof structures that overhang the seating are much better for keeping visitors and benches dry. There's no point building a permanent structure if the rain comes in the side and half the group are still getting wet.
What is the maximum size of group that you want to cater for?
- What style of groups are you wanting to host? Forest education sessions typically take place in a circle with children sat around the outside whereas performances or lectures may choose more amphitheatre style seating.
- Can you use your own timber to build the structure, or have it sourced from a local supplier?
Using a wooden structure for teaching in a forest is a great opportunity to engage visitors with the relevance of sustainable timber production.



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If you are considering a very heavy use site, or a permanent provision such as an outdoor nursery, you could create displays showcasing renewable energy sources, such as solar panels or wind turbines if you have these on site and explain their environmental benefits. It could also be helpful to consider planning in an area for the storage and drying of clothing. Wet waterproofs dry best with plenty of air circulation and not in a pile in the corner!

Water

It is important to consider whether users of your site will need to access water for both drinking and handwashing while they are there.

For a permanent site you may want to think about running piped water to the site for ease of access. If you decide to do this, water will need to be safety checked periodically to make sure it is suitable for drinking. You can do this with a water testing kit which is sent away for assessment or have a specialist come to your site to take samples.

Your local authority will provide advice on any testing and arrange for this to be carried out on your behalf.

[Water Testing - Drinking Water Inspectorate \(dwi.gov.uk\)](http://www.dwi.gov.uk)

<https://www.dwrcymru.com/en/help-advice/drinking-water-quality>



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Toilets

Composting toilets are the most sustainable, straightforward and low impact approach here if you do not have access to running water. They can be as simple as a small structure offering some protection from the elements with a hole in the ground for the waste to much more elaborate systems with multiple chambers used in rotation or removable waste compartments. You should make sure that any waste is kept as far as possible from all water courses. Follow local planning guidance on this.

Temporary portaloos may be an option if you are carrying out all your site visits within a short period of time.

Compost toilets

<https://www.waterlesstoilets.co.uk/compost-toilets/?v=79cba1185463>



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Food and Hygiene

Some groups may want to provide their own food in the woodland, but it can also be useful to provide cooking facilities for groups to use. This can range from a simple fire-pit in the middle of your log seating area, to a more elaborate outdoor kitchen. To design an outdoor kitchen, think about the type of cooking that the group might want to do. You could think about food preparation surfaces, storage, pizza ovens and more. You may need to get professional guidance on this to help with the design and build.

Think about how you will keep food cool in the woodland. This could range from cool boxes to a fridge kept in an outbuilding. Make sure you think about how to keep food safe in between sessions, it's not recommended to leave any food on site as it could end up attracting rodents. Hand washing can be achieved with a simple tip-tap system, or by purchasing a more elaborate outdoor hand washing station. Best practice is to provide warm running water. Whatever you choose, it will be important to think about food hygiene. It is recommended that you gain the Basic Food Hygiene certificate and follow all guidance by your training provider. If you are providing food on a regular basis, you may be required to register with the Food Standards Agency. Check their website for more detailed guidance



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Food hygiene

<https://www.food.gov.uk/business-guidance/food-hygiene-for-your-business>



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