

New Leaves



Final Report for The Blagrove Trust
Project Period: April 2015 – March 2018
Reporting period: includes Year 3:
April 2017– March 2018

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Final Report: The New Leaves project

1.0 How the project has developed over the last 3 years

In the three years since the start of the New Leaves Project in 2015, schools on the Isle of Wight have been through a testing time.

The reduction of central funding has had a significant impact on smaller schools such as those on the Isle of Wight, particularly when compared with their counterparts just across the Solent. Schools have had to carefully scrutinise budgets and make difficult choices regarding learning opportunities outside the classroom, such as choosing whether the children can attend Forest School programmes or swimming lessons. There has also been an impact on staffing, with some key staff - both support and teaching staff – being cut.

Where schools have come to us with budget deficits, we have worked with them to engineer ways for the children to attend the programmes. To this end we have delivered some programmes in school grounds, such as the woodland area and field at St Saviour's Primary School in Totland; and local natural spaces within walking distance of the school, such as the woodland on the school site at St Mary's Primary School in Ryde and the local beach which was just a ten minute walk away, which has saved on transport costs.

The majority of schools have been able to fund the first six weeks of the programme but have been grateful for the funding from The Blagrave Trust and have understood the benefits of a twelve week programme beyond the initial six weeks.

The Isle of Wight is now the county with the highest number of home educated children in the UK, with one in fifty children now taught at home.

<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/education/education-news/home-schooling-rise-children-uk-figures-parents-school-exclusions-three-years-a8323326.html>

Some parents have made that choice because the one to one classroom support for children with special or additional needs is no longer available to them.

Hampshire and Isle of Wight Wildlife Trust has addressed this through the New Leaves Project in the final year, by working with home educated families, specifically with children who have additional needs such as Autistic Spectrum Disorder. We have worked out systems to ensure good communication with these groups and ways to engage parents as educators.



Through the experience of delivering the New Leaves Project we have been able to enhance the skills of staff in working with children with additional needs and give valuable experience to our volunteer team, one of whom has passed her Level 1 Forest School qualification and is currently undertaking the Level 3 leadership qualification.

Over the three years we have delivered:

Year 1:

- One twelve week Forest School programme to a mixed age nurture group from Barton Primary School, Newport at our Bouldnor Forest Nature Reserve.
- One twelve week Forest School programme to a Reception class from St Thomas's RC Primary School, Carisbrooke with a high proportion of children needing support with communication and language development at our Bouldnor Forest Nature Reserve.
- One programme for children attending the Island Learning Centre (PRU) at our Bouldnor Forest Nature Reserve with a range of behavioural and learning difficulties.
- Two Forest School taster sessions for children from Nine Acres Primary School, Newport.
- Three training sessions for adults to support learning outside the classroom through Forest School.

Year 2:

- One taster session for 31 children from Shalfleet Primary School.
- One twelve week programme for a mixed age nurture group from St Mary's RC Primary School, Ryde, with six weeks of the delivery in woodland on school grounds and six weeks on the beach owing to constraints of time and finance.
- One twelve week programme Y4 nurture group from St Saviour's RC Primary School in Totland, which took place in the woodland and field on school grounds owing to constraints of time and finance.
- One twelve week programme with the Island Learning Centre at Bouldnor Forest for 6 – 10 year old children with a range of behaviour and learning difficulties who had been excluded from school.

Year 3:

- One twelve week programme for home educated children with additional needs aged 4 – 10.
- One twelve week programme for home educated children with additional needs aged 11 – 15.



Year 3 Continued:

- One twelve week programme with the Island Learning Centre at Bouldnor Forest for 6 – 10 year old children with a range of behaviour and learning difficulties who had been excluded from school.
- Four Forest School taster sessions with Lane's End Primary School.
- Four Forest School taster sessions with Yarmouth Primary School.
- Four Forest School taster sessions with Shalfleet Primary School.
- One Forest School taster session with Niton Primary School.

NB. Owing to the fact that Yarmouth Primary School attended six sessions in the Summer term but did not attend sessions in September / October 2017 to finish their programme, we used the time instead to deliver a range of Forest School experience days with Lane's End and Niton Primary Schools at Bouldnor Forest Nature Reserve. This change in scheduling meant that the delivery of all three twelve week programmes overlapped over the winter, building up staff resilience no end!

The New Leaves project has made a massive difference to all of the children involved, helping to build a level of resilience for children who have very difficult lives. We really appreciate The Blagrove Trust's support which has allowed us to deliver this work and on behalf of all those involved, would like to say a heartfelt **thank you**.

2.0 Things that didn't go well

A change in the staffing and staffing structure at the Island Learning Centre (Pupil Referral Unit) presented some challenges, with staff attending in the third year who did not really understand the Forest School ethos and were not comfortable in an outdoor environment.

A number of strategies were used to engage and enthuse staff, which were successful to a point, but the New Leaves team was in agreement that some basic training for school staff, before they attend with their group, could make all the difference to their experience in the woods and how they are able to support the learning and development of the young people.

Another challenge was that Yarmouth Primary School attended half of their programme in the summer term 2017 and was due to attend the second half in the new academic year. However, owing to a staff change they did not attend the second half of their programme. Therefore, at short notice, we were able to offer a programme to the Island Learning Zone for people on the waiting list who had not managed to get on the initial programme. This group had a high level of special needs and had to manage some challenging weather conditions and various illnesses over the winter. There had not been the opportunity to spend as much time with the families before the sessions began as we would have liked, but all the families were very happy with the progress their children were making.



Some of these were teenagers with low self-esteem, there were three children of different ages with Asperger's syndrome, two with English as a second language, two with ADHD, one with a processing disorder and two with hearing impairment.

We found this group more challenging to communicate with than the previous Home Education group and on reflection we feel that we have now built up better strategies and systems to accommodate these groups, such as working out how parents can attend initial briefing sessions within the constraints of working hours or childcare for young siblings.

One of the interesting achievements of this group was the work we did with the children with Asperger's. There were three children in the group with Asperger's and a fourth with a processing disorder. Staff discovered that all four had an interest in the computer game Minecraft, and used it as a vehicle for further learning. This supported the children's social and emotional development, reducing isolation.

One of the children, who couldn't cope with getting dirt on her hands, was given suitable gloves and with support was able to take them off when using tools. Two of the children couldn't cope with loud, unexpected noises, and supported each other during the sessions when other children became too loud.

3.0 What the young people have thought about their involvement

At the beginning and end of each of the twelve Forest School sessions, the children gathered in the fire circle to discuss what we were going to do during the sessions and our plans for the following week. All of the children's ideas and plans were facilitated. Sometimes there would be an adult led activity where observation of a child had led to staff scaffolding their learning by bringing in additional equipment or providing opportunities to develop an idea or skill.

This could be anything from supplying drainpipes to enhance water play or saws to coppice hazel to build a ladder for the treehouse. This child-centred holistic approach to learning and development is central to the Forest School pedagogy and each New Leaves programme has been shaped by the individual children taking part. At the end of each programme the children were asked to complete a child-friendly evaluation form.



In their evaluation forms, children were asked to circle the icon which best described how they felt about Forest School. These figures were from the Year 3 cohort:

- 89% of young people circled “Very Happy”
- 11% of young people circled “Happy”
- No young people circled “Not Sure” or “Unhappy”

When asked if they enjoyed going to Forest School, 100% of young people answered yes.

When asked what was the best thing at Forest School:

- 40% of young people answered den building.
- 20% of young people answered making and having fires.
- 11% of young people answered making bows and arrows.

Other answers included “Everything”, “Making rope swings”, “Being outside”, “Going on adventures”, “Making a Mud-Donalds” and “Hot chocolate”.

When asked if there was anything they didn’t like about Forest School 90% of young people said there was nothing they didn’t like at Forest School. Other answers included “hurting my finger” and “going home”.

When asked if they felt safe at Forest School, 100% of children said yes.

When asked about something new they learnt at Forest School, there were almost as many answers as there were children!

- 33% said making fire and cooking on the fire
- 17% said using tools and making things
- 17% referred to teamwork, friendship and working together
- 11% said how to survive
- 11% said having fun
- Others said “everything” and one child simply said “Freedom”.

Finally the children were asked to share a memory of Forest School and the answers were extremely diverse, which clearly demonstrates the success of the project in its endeavour to offer child-centred learning. Most children referred to the food we had cooked, friendships made, craft items created, using tools and games played. One child referred to “Dancing in the snow on the field” and another recalled “Paddling in the sea”. The project has clearly given the children some memories to treasure.



4.0 The impact of the project

Although we started the project using a combination of the PEMS and Leuven Scales to evaluate the children's progress, it was decided to discontinue it after a trial period because we found it unreliable. This is because some of the children we have been working with are negatively affected by their domestic circumstances or their own special needs or mental health issues which don't reflect the progress they are making at Forest School. Something that had happened at home that day, for example, could have a negative impact on their behaviour which had nothing to do with Forest School. We needed to see a broader picture and the impact on the child at the end of the twelve week period was more useful than the fluctuations in progress from week to week. We also found, with the PRU children, that despite the project's aim to not have Forest School used as a reward or punishment, children were often kept back from sessions due to their behaviour at the Centre during the week so the breaks in attendance were also having an effect.

Therefore, having taken advice from the Forest School Association, we continued to use our three-pronged approach by consulting with parents, school staff and the children about how the programmes had impacted on their learning and development. We have learned that there are other scoring systems which have now taken the place of PEMS and Leuven which don't have the drawbacks we had identified and which the young people themselves score. The staff at Bishop's Wood Centre are currently trialling the system and we look forward to hearing the results and possibly trialling it ourselves in the future. The focus on the new system is more about how the children feel about different things rather than the adults' observations of them.

Parents' evaluations (Year 3 cohort):

- 90% of parents had heard of Forest School before sessions began.
- 90% of parents felt well-informed before sessions began.
- 100% of parents received printed information about Forest School before sessions began.
- 100% of parents felt that their child enjoyed Forest School.
- 30% of parents said their child had some anxiety about Forest School before sessions began, mostly about meeting new people. One parent said, "He was often uncertain about going, although I really don't know why. He was often shy at first but soon rushing about and joining in. The staff were all reassuring and friendly and really good with him".
Another said "Yes, at first he was unsure but the leaders were quick to notice and involve him to build his confidence".



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- 100% of parents said that their child talked about their Forest School experiences at home.
- When asked if their child showed improvement in the following areas of learning and development, this is the number of parents who told us they had noticed a positive change:
 - Self-confidence (how they value their abilities) 57%
 - Self-esteem (how they value themselves) 42%
 - Independence (willingness to do things for themselves) 53%
 - Resilience (their ability to cope with challenges) 50%
 - Attitude to learning (how they questions and explore) 39%
 - Interest in nature (their use of outdoor spaces to play & learn) 75%

Further comments from parents:

- “Her confidence has grown since attending. She is gutted it is coming to an end”.
- “The best way to learn – if only it was on-going! My kids would now spend all their time in the woods, whatever the weather!”
- “They can’t wait until the next week, discussing it all in great detail”.
- “They always sleep well afterwards! They talk about what they have done and things they want to do next time”.
- “My children both enjoyed so many things about their Forest School sessions and each week talked about the things planned for the following week”.
- The children have so enjoyed Forest School and we are sad it has to end. Really looking forward to taking some of what they have learned and continuing to use the great outdoors for more learning”.
- “He talked about how much fun it was and wanted to do the activities in the woods with Dad”.
- “The course has coincided with some big changes in W’s life and we’ve seen many changes in W too. I’m sure Forest School has helped nurture these”.
- “They really loved it and spoke a lot about it really positively – about all the people there and the things they’d done really proudly”.
- “The children have been helped when needed and left when needed. Every interest has been listened to and made to happen – they have had the best time. Thank you so much”.
- “He talked about how much he enjoyed making things, especially out of willow. He would plan and design what he wanted to make the next week”.
- “They loved the bugs, fires, cooking, projects, talked about the dynamics which arose with their peers”.
- “My boys have loved coming each week. They adore Kathy, Rick and Sue. They have learned to deal with a number of practical and social situations. Thank you so much for this amazing time and opportunity”.



Teachers' evaluations

All teaching staff recorded improvements in the children's self-confidence, self-esteem, independence, resilience, attitude to learning and interest in nature in each group.

All staff that responded felt they had been given enough information about Forest School before sessions began, that the staff were competent and enough attention was paid to health and safety, that the activities were appropriate for the age and ability levels of the children and that the Forest School staff worked as an effective team.

One teacher noted that:

- "Most children have clearly increased confidence and resilience. This can be with their learning, friendships and emotional development".
- "The activities ensured all the children were able to achieve".

Another noted that:

- "It was particularly good having Rick around as one or two of the boys responded very well to having a male on the team".
- "The children have loved sharing their new knowledge about nature with their classmates". "One child has shown a real increase in self-confidence. Another who had problems with social skills has made real progress in their play times at school. All of the children have achieved in some way".

Another said:

- "One child has made huge strides in their self-confidence and their relationships with other children. They are now able to engage more with their peers and show a new resilience when struggling in the classroom".
- "During the weeks we had together in the woods, the Forest School team has given a fantastic opportunity to ensure that each child who has taken part has developed physically, socially, creatively and emotionally".

Since the end of the project, the PRU has asked if one of their children, who has severe post-traumatic stress disorder, can continue to attend sessions with his support worker, as this programme has been the only intervention which has helped him. A staff member said "*We have some funding for therapeutic input and he is in need of lots of things at the moment. I suggested you and Rik ... as I felt A bonded well with you both, Rik could be a positive male role model and the skills you both have could be perfect for him...*"

Our evaluations demonstrate overwhelmingly that Forest School has presented a positive experience for the children who have attended, especially for those whose experience of the natural environment was very limited before.



5.0 Plans for the Future

The Wildlife Trust's report "Every Child Wild" demonstrates how little contact today's children have with nature and why it's important to reverse the trend. It states that "Children are happier, healthier and more creative when they are connected to the natural world. This should be an option not just for a few, but for every child in the UK". We also know that mental health issues in the UK's children are higher than they have ever been recorded before and opportunities to play are limited owing to the demands of the school curriculum and modern lifestyles. Child hospital admissions for mental health disorders on the Isle of Wight are almost double the UK national average <https://onthewight.com/isle-of-wight-children-admitted-to-hospital-for-mental-health-disorders-double-uk-average/> and, despite the rich bounty of its natural resources, it is clear that very many children are growing up in the county without ever spending time in them.

Evidence of the connection between access to nature and good mental health and well-being is overwhelming and it is through initiatives such as the New Leaves Project that we are able to reach some of those children who would not otherwise have the opportunity to paddle in the sea, climb a tree, collect beetles in a jar, fish newts out of a pond, build a den or cook on an open fire. Not only do these opportunities offer children holistic learning and development opportunities, they support mental health and well-being and provide them with a bank of treasured memories to last a lifetime. Budget constraints should not be the reason why these children shouldn't have access to their natural heritage, so wherever you live there should be a way of reaping its rewards. Therefore, our plans for the future, inspired by the Blagrave funded New Leaves Project include ways for more adults to be in a position to support children on the Isle of Wight to connect with nature. Ideas include:

- Offering training opportunities to school teachers and support staff to give them the confidence to take learning outside the classroom, the understanding of how experiences in nature link to the National Curriculum and how the well-being of both staff and children is supported through nature connection.
- Establishing a programme of learning for parents who have not had direct experience of outdoor play, but who want to offer the benefits of those experiences to their own children. Sessions would include information on how to keep safe, making the most of the weather and the seasons and activities such as making kites and sweep nets.
- Offering a series of workshops to local Forest School leaders and home educators to improve their skill base, eg in outdoor cooking, building tree houses or wildlife discovery and species identification and the benefits of mud play.
- Working with different organisations (eg the Island Learning Centre and the Isle of Wight Youth Trust) to offer Forest School as a therapeutic intervention for those young people who have been identified as in need.
- Offering long-term Forest School programmes as newly identified by the Forest School Association as a minimum of 24 weeks duration, to offer children the most beneficial experience.



6.0 Project Funding

The New Leaves project has been generously funded by The Blagrave Trust, with smaller amounts of match funding provided by the Red Hill Trust and the Martin Laing Foundation.

Over the 3 years, expenditure for the project has been as follows:

Cost heading	Details	Amount
Staffing including oncosts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Education Officer x 1 day a week with NI and pension costs Assistant Education Officer x 1 day per week with NI and pension costs On-costs to cover financial management, insurance, HR, IT support 	£44,574
Staff travel and training	Including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> travel from the Island to training courses, Forest School conferences and education meetings staff training – first aid staff training – food hygiene Forest School accreditation fee 	£768.40
Refreshments	Including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a range of ingredients for campfire cooking refreshments for sessions 	£1,624.25
Waterproof / protective clothing	Including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> children's waterproof dungarees hats and gloves waterproof jackets 	£314.00
Tools and equipment and consumables	Including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cooking utensils Firebox, campfire grill, fire steels and fire gloves Saws, saw blades and sharpeners Outdoor canopy and tarpaulins Mini hammock Field guides and magnifying glasses Mobile phone charges Handwash, toilet rolls and paper towels Storage boxes Garden tools – garden sieve, pruners, twine, litter pickers Camera and disk Second-hand go-pro 	£3,647.58
Contribution towards Bouldnor Forest Centre costs:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Project contribution towards rent and running costs (electricity, phone etc) of the Bouldnor site for the 3 year period – 40 days per year 	£10,200
Total costs:		£61,128.23

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7.0 Summary of Outputs for the Project

Output	Target	Actually Achieved
The delivery of 12 week Forest School programmes for children with additional needs ie. those who are vulnerable, disadvantaged, have behaviour or learning problems, have been excluded or are at risk of exclusion or have special educational needs. The programmes engaged with 136 children and 60 adults.	9 x 12 week programmes	9 x 12 week programmes
Delivery of a series of Forest school taster sessions to encourage future involvement – for pupils, teachers and parents to be able to experience sessions and better understand the format, content and benefit of the sessions. Number of school taster sessions: 346 children participated in these sessions Number of adult taster sessions for teachers and parents: 58 adults participated in these sessions.	n/a	20 sessions 4 sessions
Total number of participants experiencing Forest School sessions:	330	600

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Gallery from Year 3: The Island Learning Centre (Pupil Referral Unit)



5-11 year old children with a range of behavioural and learning problems took part in many new experiences during the programme and developed their skills in tool use and campfire cooking.



Their walk through the muddy woodland footpaths to the beach where we cooked up hot chocolate and snacks, challenged most and built up their resilience. One boy, with an interest in fossils was supported in his endeavours and was thrilled to find a fossilised shark's tooth and a piece of animal bone. He was able to make a wooden box for the fossil to present as a gift to his mum. It was a proud moment for him and had a big impact on his self-esteem.



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The Isle of Wight Learning Zone (Home Educated Families): Group 1



Children in this 4-10 year old group enjoyed a wide range of activities, many linking to their imaginative play centred around the Vikings.

Some very young children developed some competent whittling skills and a group planted their own garden.

We also managed an excellent menu, being inclusive of a variety of dietary requirements including gluten free and vegan diets.

The final picture shows the group listening to a story in the storm shelter.



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The Isle of Wight Learning Zone (Home Educated Families): Group 2



There was a diverse range of needs amongst the children in this 10-15 year old group.

Much of the activity was based around cooking a broad menu, including cakes in the Dutch oven.



The older teenagers built their confidence over the weeks in tool use and created a range of items, including mallets. The children with Asperger's collaborated over their interest in Minecraft, developing games which involved scavenger hunts and quests.



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Forest School Taster Days with Lane's End and Niton Primary Schools



The Forest School experience day with Niton primary School in October linked in to their work on The Stone Age, including building shelters, foraging and cooking Stone Age food.

Class teacher, Stephanie Dunford said, "Thank you for such an amazing day. You and you staff really made the Stone Age real for the children. My class had a fantastic time and so did I!"

Helper Sadie Hayes-Davis added "The children had a lovely time – they talked about their day nearly all the way home! Thank you – I had a great day too, I especially enjoyed the fire starting!"

Parent Julie Cox said "Jess had a brilliant time thank you. It was lovely to see all their happy, smiling, muddy faces coming off the bus."

Parent Lizzie Webb said "Maddie had a great day and hasn't stopped telling us all about it. Thank you!"



Lane's End Primary School children spent a magical time in the woods exploring "The Forbidden Forest" at Bouldnor at their Forest School experience day, supporting literacy work on Harry Potter. They played sensory games to explore the colours, sounds, smells and textures of the woodland and got the chance to make their own wands from a choice of different types of wood, build a broom, make a magic potion and build a hut for Hagrid. We fed woodlice and snail eggs to the Bowtruckle to thank him for giving up his sticks and finished the afternoon by lying down on a carpet of beech leaves and feeling the magic of the forest tingling through our bodies, from the tips of our toes to the ends of our hair!

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