

An Evaluation of the

**Forest Schools
Woodland
Improvement Grant
in the
East of England**

on behalf of
The Forestry Commission

September 2007

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Summary

Forest Schools originated in Scandinavia in the 1950's and have been introduced into the UK in the last decade. They seek to enable children to learn social, physical and educational skills while encouraging an understanding of the environment. Extensive evaluation of the benefits of Forest Schools has taken place in the UK. The Forest Schools Woodland Improvement Grant is part of the wider Forest Schools East Initiative and was an outcome of the East of England Regional Woodland Strategy 'Woodland for life.

The grant was made available over two financial years, with this evaluation focussing on year one. Applicants were required to submit a standard Forestry Commission grant application form accompanied by supporting information as necessary. The process was overseen by the Forestry Commission's Social Development Officer, supported by colleagues and a wider steering group.

During year one, a total of 17 applications were submitted, 14 of which were approved. At least one application was approved for each county in the region and a variety of applicants were supported, including schools, environmental NGO's and training organisations. Total funding awarded amounted to £65,000 with training representing the largest category of activity supported followed by Forest Schools kit.

Applicants generally experienced a very high quality of support from the Forestry Commission which overcame difficulties with the application forms, the latter due to the use of forms normally used for site specific woodland management works. All approved schemes have been successfully implemented and met, or exceeded, their stated outputs. All applicants declared that without the grant support they would either have not gone ahead with the proposal, or had to scale down their activity to a level that may have failed to achieve the necessary impact.

In addition to achieving direct benefits, there is strong evidence that a number of indirect benefits have been created. The two most evident, if difficult to measure, are an increase in social capital in the communities involved in Forest Schools, and an engagement with the Forestry Commission of a range of organisations and individuals outwith its 'normal' client base.

It is recommended that, resources permitting, the Forest Schools Woodland Improvement Grant is continued for a further period of time, during which opportunity is taken to embed the process in mainstream educational provision. It should also be an objective for the Forestry Commission to withdraw from being the primary funder of Forest School activity in the region as the benefits become apparent to education authorities.

Recommendations are made as to the continuation of the Woodland Improvement Grant and the ways in which the knowledge and skills gained in the two year pilot period can be shared and strengthened.

Although the Forest Schools Woodland Improvement Grant does provide valuable indications of how the Forestry Commission could extend its engagement with wider audiences, it is considered that Forest Schools represent an inherently low risk area of work and thus the processes involved may not be directly replicable.

1.0 Introduction

Background

- 1.1 The Forest School Woodland Improvement Grant in the East of England was introduced in January 2006 and made available during two financial years – 2006/07 and 2007/08.
- 1.2 The Forest Schools Woodland Improvement Grant (WIG) is part of the wider Forest Schools East Initiative¹ which was created in 2004 and was an outcome of the East of England Regional Woodland Strategy ‘Woodland for life’². Forest Schools East is supported by the Forestry Commission, Forest Education Initiative, Green Light Trust and Suffolk Education Business Partnership³. The strategy recognised the benefits of Forest Schools and that the region, at the time, had no such provision within its area.
- 1.3 Initiative EL1 of the Action Plan that accompanied the Strategy states ‘Develop opportunities for lifelong learning through trees and woodland’ and Action EL1a develops the theme further by stating ‘Establish a number of Forest Schools’. Partnership funding for training, administration, communication media & transport and grant funding for physical infrastructure were identified as required resources with the Forestry Commission highlighted as lead partner.
- 1.4 Forest Schools originated in Scandinavia in the 1950’s and have in the last ten years become widespread (although not commonplace) in the UK. They seek to enable children to learn social, physical and educational skills while encouraging an understanding of the environment. Extensive evaluation of the benefits of Forest Schools has taken place in the UK⁴.
- 1.5 Woodland Improvement Grants are one of a suite of grants offered by the Forestry Commission under the English Woodland Grant Scheme (EWGS)⁵. WIG’s are ‘focused on initiating and securing targeted change and take opportunities for, the improvement of delivery of public benefits from woodlands’. Further background information to WIGs is given in Appendix I ‘EWGS5 Woodland Improvement Grant Guide’. The Forest Schools WIG only operates within the East of England Region.
- 1.6 The East of England Region includes the counties of Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire, Essex, Hertfordshire, Norfolk & Suffolk and the unitary authorities of Luton, Peterborough, Southend & Thurrock.

¹ www.forest-schools-east.org

² ‘Woodland for life’ (2003) East of England Regional Assembly & Forestry Commission
www.woodlandforlife.net

³ www.forestry.gov.uk, www.foresteducation.org, www.greenlighttrust.org,
www.suffolkebp.co.uk

⁴ Evaluation of Forest School: Phase 1 – Wales (2003) & Phase 2 – England (2006) Forest Research & New Economics Foundation www.forestresearch.gov.uk

⁵ www.forestry.gov.uk

Implementation

- 1.7 The East of England Forest Schools WIG was developed by the Forestry Commission (FC) and its partners during 2004 and 2005 in response to the Regional Woodland Strategy Action EL1a as described in 1.3. Agreement to introduce the WIG was secured and finance identified by the region as part of its annual Business Planning process for 2006/07 and 2007/08.
- 1.8 A total of £100,000 was allocated to the WIG, with an intention for the funding to be approximately equally shared between years.
- 1.9 The WIG was promoted through the regional and trade media. A News Release was issued by the FC (Appendix II) and this secured coverage in a number of regional newspapers, radio and in the forestry trade publications.
- 1.10 The Forest Schools WIG was formally launched at a conference in Saffron Walden, Essex, on 25th January 2006, entitled 'Forest Schools East, Forest School Opportunities in the East of England: Concept ...Training ...Funding'. Invitees included Local Education Authority Officers, environmental education NGO's, teachers, funders & woodland owners and was attended by approximately 85 people.
- 1.11 In addition to the generic WIG guidance (1.5) a note explaining the East of England Forest School WIG was produced in November 2005 (Appendix III) and this was made available at the conference and circulated to interested parties.
- 1.12 Advice to applicants was also available through the FC East of England Social Development Officer, Sunny Singh, who was responsible for developing and managing the FC's input to Forest Schools East, including the Forest School WIG.
- 1.13 Applications were submitted using the FC's standard EWGS and WIG application forms (Appendix IV).
- 1.14 Applications for the first year of funding had to be submitted by 30th June 2006 and for the second year by 11th May 2007.
- 1.15 The WIG was run as a Challenge Fund, in that applicants were required to stipulate the percentage funding they were asking for from the FC and were evaluated and judged against each other.
- 1.16 Following submission of the claims, basic eligibility and assessment checks were made on the applications prior to them being submitted to a grants panel, which in year one met on 5th July 2006. The panel consisted of Susannah Podmore (Forest Education Initiative), Helen Scott Davies (Suffolk Education Business Partnership), Simon Shakespeare (Forest School Training Company) and Sunny Singh (FC). Applicants were written to informing them of the result of their application on 12th July 2006.

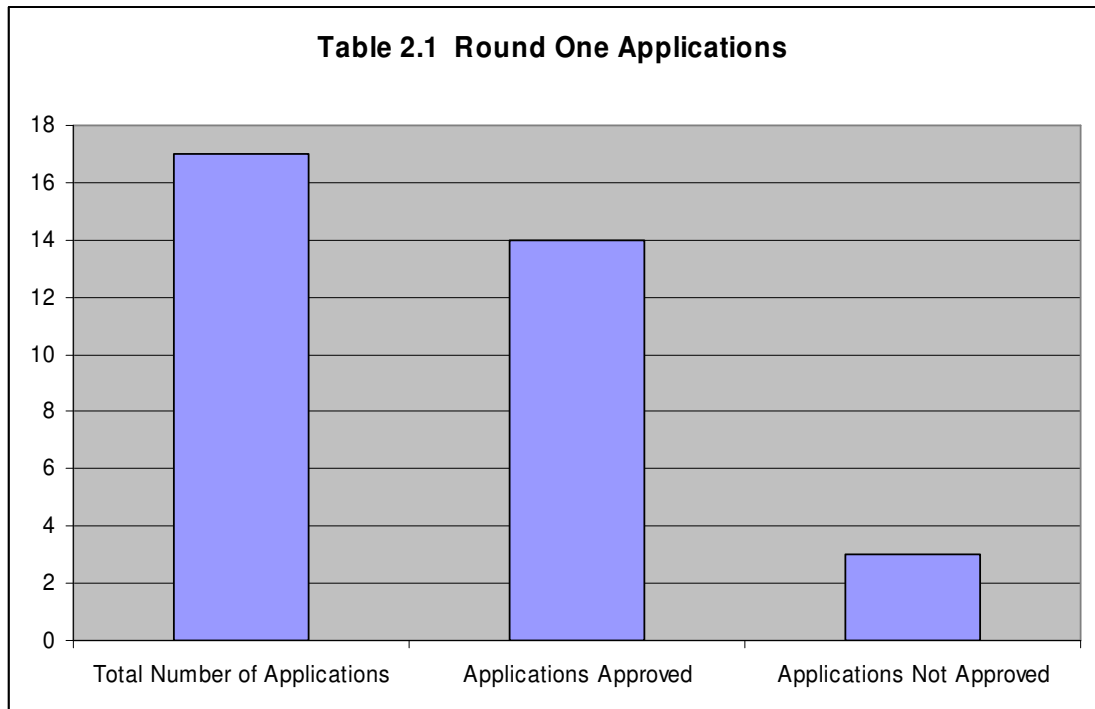
- 1.17 Work had to be completed and claims for grant made within the financial year identified for the expenditure. In the case of first year the claim date was specified as 16th February 2007.

Evaluation

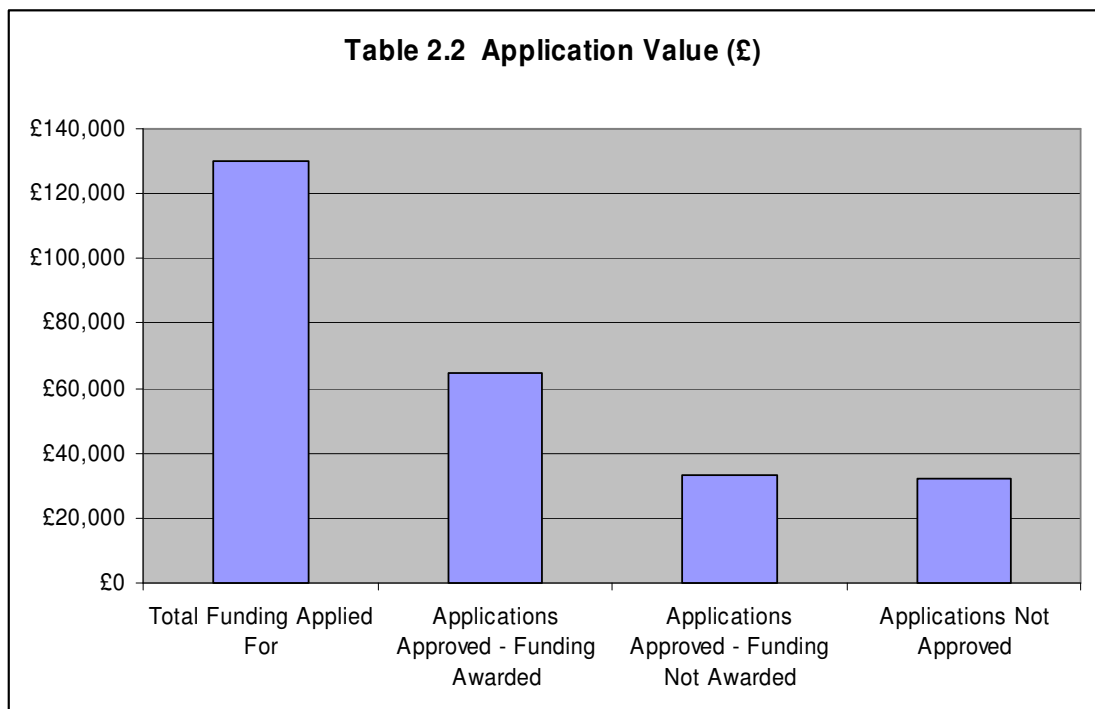
- 1.18 The purpose of this study is to ‘understand the success and challenges of administering the Forest School WIG in the East of England’. It has been commissioned by the Forestry Commission East of England Region and commenced in September 2006, with completion due for September 2007. The focus of the study was to be applicants to the first year of the grant, although wherever possible applicants to the second year have also been consulted.
- 1.19 The evaluation has taken the form of an initial meeting with Sunny Singh, familiarisation with scheme documentation and information, and telephone interviews with applicants and others involved in the funding of Forest Schools. All applicants were asked a series of standard questions (Appendix V) relating to their experience of the grant process, with supplementary questions asked in order to develop facets of particular applications.
- 1.20 The relatively small number of applications makes statistical analysis of the results of limited value and therefore the study concentrates on a qualitative evaluation of the schemes implementation and recommendations for future action.

2.0 Forest School WIG Results

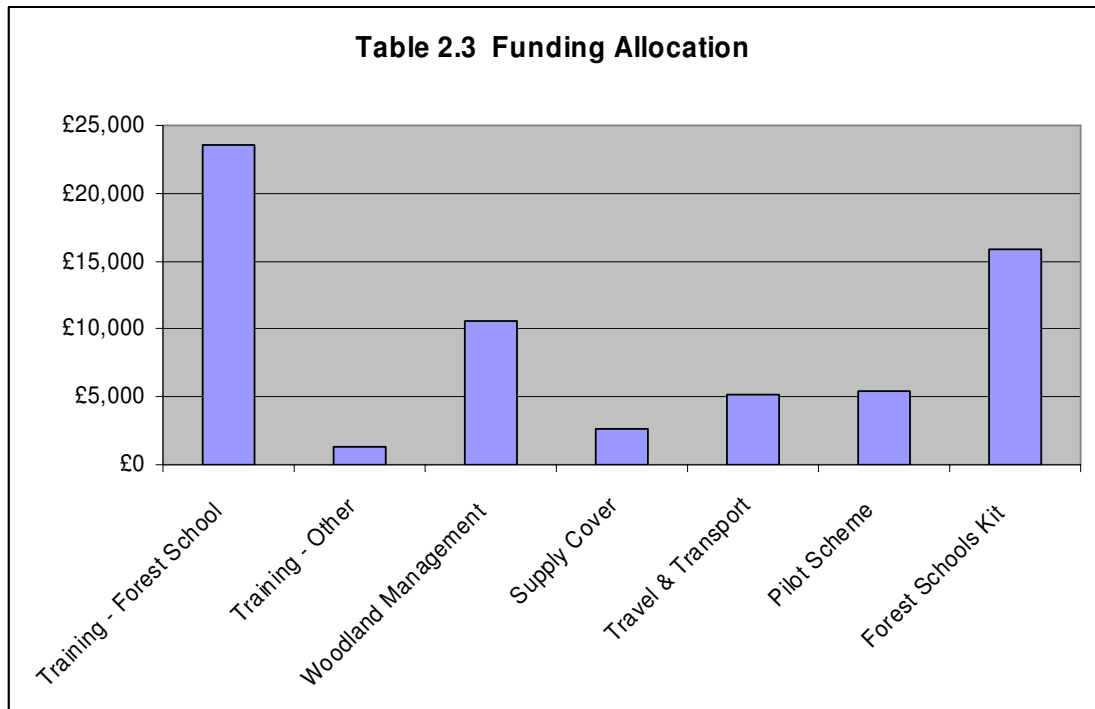
2.1 A total of 17 applications were received for the first round of which 14 were accepted.



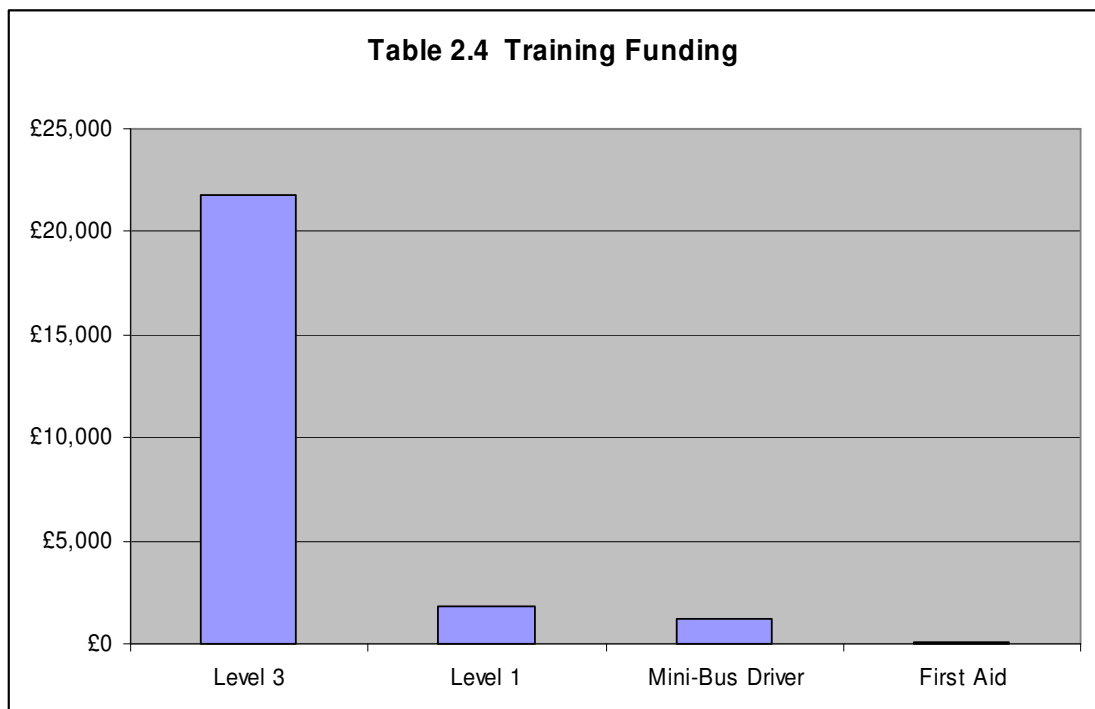
2.2 Applications received totalled £130,005. Approved applications received funding of £64,535, with match funding from applicants and non-approved items totalling £33,132. Applications not approved totalled £32,338.



2.3 Of the total funds committed, £23600 was awarded to support training. £10,620 was awarded for woodland management works (fencing etc.), £5400 for a Special Educational Needs (SEN) Pilot and £15905 for Forest Schools Kit (teaching materials, wet weather gear, camping equipment).

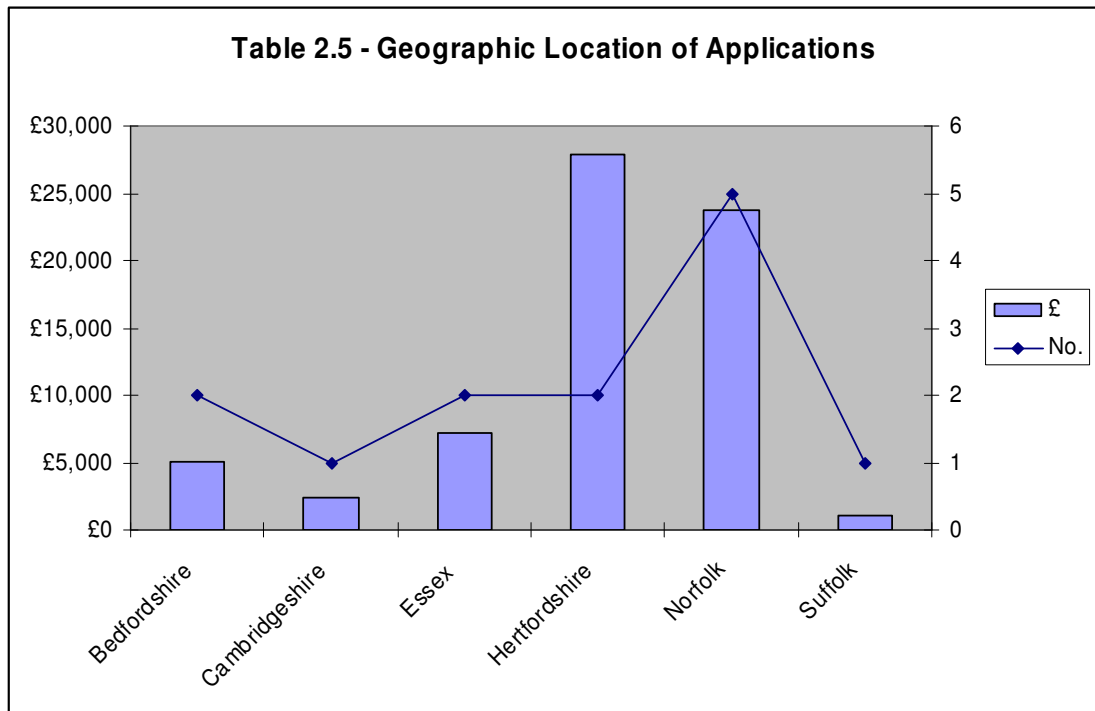


2.4 As indicated above, training constituted the largest single category of expenditure of approved applications. The majority of spend (£21750) was on Level 3 Forest School Practitioners Award⁶.

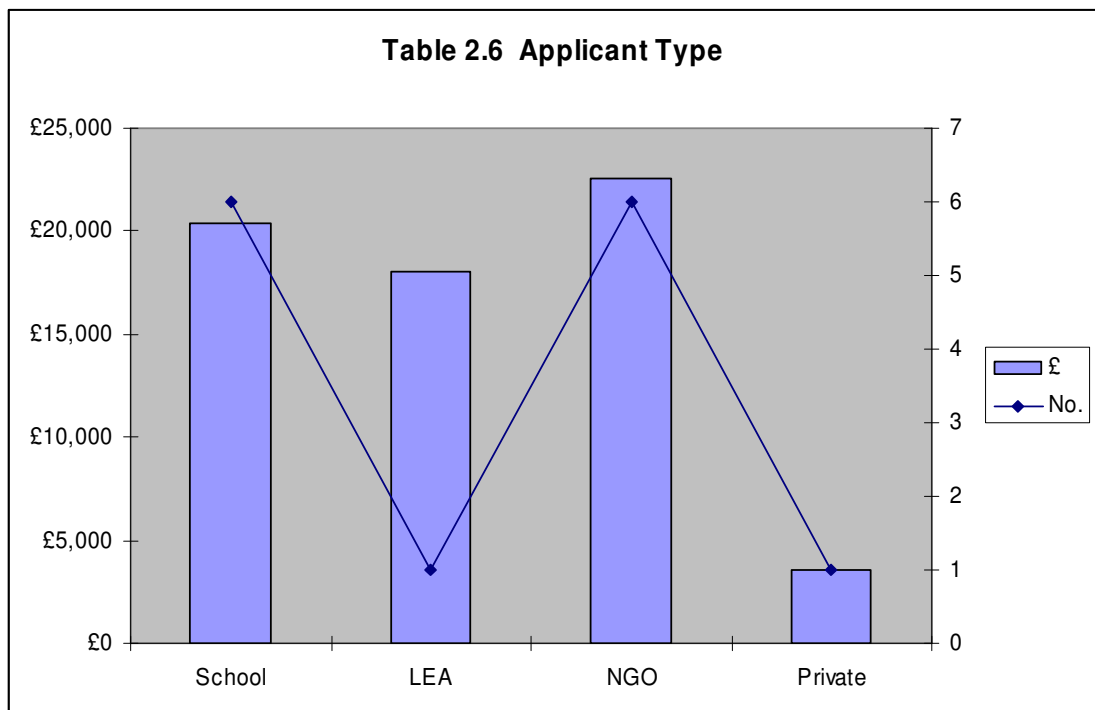


⁶ See www.forestschoools.com/level3.php

2.5 At least one application was approved in each county within the region, although the funding approved varied significantly.



2.6 Applicants were of four types – schools, Local Education Authorities (LEA), non-governmental organisations (NGO’s – wildlife trusts etc.) and private landowners. The one private landowner whose application was approved worked in conjunction with an environmental education NGO.



3.0 Findings

Marketing & Promotion

- 3.1 The Forest Schools WIG was initially promoted through a Forestry Commission News Release and letters to potential applicants. Most applicants had heard of, but were not directly involved in, Forest Schools prior to the introduction of the WIG and were thus attuned to such information becoming available.
- 3.2 The event in Saffron Walden in January 2006 was well attended and attracted additional publicity in itself. Applicants who attended found it a useful and interesting event. A number described it as 'inspiring'. Whether the location influenced the geographic origin of attendees and resulting applicants is, given the small number applicants, not possible to analyse objectively. However, it would not be unreasonable to describe this as an influencing factor, however minor.
- 3.3 The first round of applications was over-subscribed, although 14 out of 17 applications received funding (Table 2.1), and therefore promotion of the grant was in proportion to the availability of funding. Additional promotion would have brought the WIG to the attention of a greater number of potential applicants and stakeholders, but given that this could have resulted in a greater number of failed applications that would appear to be little benefit in this.

Applicants

- 3.4 Given that most applicants were aware of Forest Schools prior to the launch of the WIG it is not surprising that a majority were motivated to apply for the grant given their enthusiasm for the ethos and practice of the initiative. All were already involved in environmental education to some extent – some in a full time professional capacity, others in a minor sense – and were thus receptive to the principles of Forest Schools in particular.
- 3.5 A number of applicants were already involved in Forest Schools and saw the WIG as opportunity to expand and formalise their knowledge and experience – for example some were qualified to Forest School Level 1 Award but wanted to reach Level 3, others wanted to mainstream activity which until then was undertaken on a pilot basis. Leaders trained to Level 1 only were unlikely to have been able or willing to run Forest School sessions, partly due to issues of self-confidence but also due to the school or host organisations confidence in their ability (see below).
- 3.6 A very important motivation for applying which was cited by a significant minority (and on further exploration, an underlying although unconscious factor for many others) was the structured process and accredited framework which Forest Schools, and in particular Forest Schools leader training, gave to environmental education. This was considered to be important for LEA's school governors, head teachers, parents and potential funders, who required assurance that Forest Schools was a safe and constructive activity in which to invest both resources and children's learning time.

- 3.7 Following on from, and emphasising, the previous point, training received the single largest share of funding. Training, especially to Level 3, was considered by a number of applicants to be the pivotal issue in relation to Forest Schools provision, without which delivery would not occur. Training gave practitioners not only the authority and skills to practice, but the confidence to do so. Other resources, such as equipment and teaching materials, could, some felt, possibly be obtained through other means (sponsorship, donations, improvisation) and whilst this could mean a reduced provision, in both quality and quantity, Forest Schools would simply not happen without the appropriate training.
- 3.8 Two applicants cited the ability of Forest Schools to fill a gap in provision for environmental and outdoor learning within Early Years Education which they had found difficult to fulfil through more traditional programmes and providers. Other NGO's mentioned the complementarity of Forest Schools to other environmental education programmes they were running and its ability to utilise resources (woodlands) not otherwise being used.
- 3.9 Only one private landowner applied for the WIG and thus the relation of Forest Schools to wider land management activities has not been extensively tested by the grant scheme. Nevertheless the landowner was very enthusiastic about the scheme and the benefits to him as a farmer.

Partnership Working

- 3.10 All applicants worked in partnership to an extent, although not all were conscious of doing so. Greatest evidence of partnership working came from the NGO's, who were familiar with the concept and practice and could perceive the benefits, both in terms of raising the effectiveness of their delivery but also in increasing the quality of their application and its probable acceptance. Most NGO's expanded their reach to schools out with their current practice and linked into strata of educational provision that they had not previously worked with.
- 3.11 Schools were relatively limited in the extent to which they sought to create partnerships or work within one. Most viewed the greatest opportunities for partnership to be in working with other schools in the local area in order to create clusters, perhaps to share resources (leaders, sites, equipment etc.) and experiences, to learn 'best practice' or to offset risk, for example, in the case of the only Forest School leader leaving a small school.

Scheme Process

- 3.12 Applications for the Forest School WIG were made on standard FC EWGS forms in order to fit in with the FC's existing grant processing and payment facilities. Such forms are designed for woodland owners and managers who are familiar with the terminology and for whom the questions asked are known and relevant. For many Forest School applicants, however, this was a completely new experience and all applicants reported differing degrees of difficulty in completing the forms. Some found it only a minor problem resolved with reference to the

guidance notes whilst others struggled to overcome the situation. There was a clear division between NGO's who were more used to dealing with land based grant applications, and schools who reported experiences such as 'daunting' and 'tortuous'.

- 3.13 The use of standard costs, a standard feature of the EWGS, gave rise to a number of problems where applicants were working outside of the standard range of operations but where no fixed costs were easily obtained.
- 3.14 The need to produce a map, again a requirement of FC processes, was also an issue for many applicants. Most were not familiar with working with maps and could not immediately access them. Others were applying for non-site specific works (e.g. training) and were thus unsure of what maps should be supplied. The FC supply free maps (under licence to the Ordnance Survey) and this matter was largely overcome through communication.
- 3.15 Whether any applicants were put off applying altogether is not possible to discern given the availability of the forms and guidance notes on the FC website⁷ and thus that some people may have not got any further than this. One applicant did report 'nearly giving up' but persevered and was ultimately successful.
- 3.16 A benefit cited by one applicant and detected in others responses was that the standard FC WIG Application form which asked for apparently irrelevant details of, for example, tree species and soils, had in fact made the applicants consider such issues and become familiar with their sites in a way which they may not otherwise have done. This could impact not only on the quality of their teaching but also their ability to maximise the use of the site in a manner sympathetic to its other qualities.
- 3.17 Despite the difficulties reported above, all applicants who had contacted the FC reported an overwhelmingly positive experience in terms of the guidance assistance offered and this had enabled them to progress their application. Applicants were very complimentary regarding the assistance and support provided (primarily by Sunny Singh) and found this to be invaluable in putting together their schemes and applications. A number remarked how they found this an unusual, or even unique, experience amongst funding organisations.
- 3.18 Those first year applicants who went on to apply to the second year reported a much better experience, not because the forms had changed but because they were now familiar with the process.
- 3.19 The judging panel met soon after the deadline and made decisions relating to all the schemes. These were communicated to all applicants within ten working days of the panels meeting, two weeks ahead of schedule. Where appropriate, reasons for refusal were given and applicants encouraged to apply again during the second year.

⁷ www.forestry.gov.uk

- 3.20 The schemes varied widely in both type and amount – from under £1000 to £41,000. There were no minimum or maximum amounts stipulated for the challenge fund. Only 3 applicants received the full amount of funding requested (including training).
- 3.21 Applications entail the allocation of broadly similar resources to process regardless of value. Given the wide range of funding sought and awarded, options other than a challenge fund format may therefore have been possible. For example, bids under a certain amount could have been submitted at any time via a streamlined process and approved or refused against a set of agreed criteria, leaving only the larger bids to be judged against each other. In this way lower value applications could be approved at any time during the year and possibly in a shorter timescale.
- 3.22 Such an approach may also have encouraged more applications from smaller schools and providers who perceived that they were at a disadvantage to larger or more experienced applicants, given that they would not consider they were in competition as much. However, conversely this could have encouraged a ‘think smaller’ attitude amongst applicants with an ensuing decline in both the quantity and quality of outputs achieved.
- 3.23 Following approval of their schemes, applicants reported minimal but good contact with the FC – most felt that ‘they knew they were there if they needed them’. A number had attended a subsequent forest School Forum and found this beneficial.
- 3.24 Applicants reported a relatively straightforward claims process and very prompt payment of claims. One small school struggled to finance the necessary cashflow in between purchase of equipment etc. and claiming the funds, but in most cases this was not an issue. Indeed, a number of applicants praised both the FC’s speed with which they paid and flexibility that they took to claim details.

Outputs & Outcomes

- 3.25 All applicants reported outcomes in excess of their original expectations – in some cases significantly so. The actual outputs differed in most cases from that specified on the application given that few applicants received full funding.
- 3.26 There was no discernible pattern of predicted versus actual outcomes between any category of applicant, whether by type, value or location. NGO’s were in general better able to estimate and monitor outputs given their experience in doing so for other projects and funders, but the numbers of applicants was too small for the trend to be conclusive.
- 3.27 Many applicants reported unexpected benefits but ones they largely attributed to Forest Schools. For example, one head teacher considered that the whole performance of the school had improved as a result of the engagement with a group of parents who had previously shown little interest. Such results are largely unmeasurable and out with the scope of this report, but are very significant and worthy of mention.

Indirect Benefits

- 3.28 In addition to the benefits outlined above, a number of other benefits have accrued as a result of the Forest Schools WIG. These are often intangible and reported by only a minority of applicants, but are relevant to a grant which operates within the context of regional and national strategies which seeks to achieve many of these wider benefits.
- 3.29 An indirect benefit of promotion in regional newspapers and media has been the raising of awareness of the educational value of trees and woodlands and the concept of Forest Schools. Although the realisation of such benefits are likely to be long term and difficult to identify, such promotion is valuable in this context.
- 3.30 Woodland management improvements were reported by only two applicants but this does not take account of the 'trickle down' effect of such knowledge in what were largely rural communities. Indeed many applicants reported great enthusiasm and interest from the wider community for the Forest School programme.
- 3.31 A number of applicants reported increased volunteering time contributed by local residents, parents and businesses as a result of them hearing about and getting involved in Forest Schools. This has many benefits, not least the greater level of engagement between school and local community and opportunities for encouraging more active lifestyles.
- 3.32 One applicant cited the opportunities for working with previously under-represented sections of the community as a result of their getting involved in Forest Schools. Again this has benefits for both school and community much wider than the programme itself.
- 3.33 Broadly speaking many of these benefits may be considered to be increasing the social capital of the communities involved in Forest Schools. Many of the communities concerned are small, isolated or disadvantaged in some respect, and through the medium of Forest Schools new relationships between various sections of the community (for example, schools, parents, businesses, landowners) are being formed which have the potential to reduce isolation, increase interaction and create lasting benefits in a wider context. New skills - technical and social - are being learnt which could be applied to a variety of situations in the local community.

Value for Money

- 3.34 Cost centred timesheets are not kept by the FC and thus actual costs of administering the grant are not definable. However, the Forest Schools WIG operates as part of a wider grant programme operated by the region and thus benefits from cost savings in this way. There is little discernible evidence of increased costs other than a proportion of the Social Development Officers time.
- 3.35 One advantage of the challenge fund approach is that it does encourage applicants to be realistic in their costings given that they know they will be in competition with others for funding. However, as outlined above it

does mean that the FC's transaction costs are broadly similar for each scheme regardless of its value.

- 3.36 Most applicants drew down funding from other sources to match the FC WIG funding. The most common source was the applicants own funding from existing budgets. Two applicants had sourced funding from businesses which had 'community' funds to support such work. Others had accessed other public sector funding for complimentary work, but not the work that was the subject of the WIG itself.
- 3.37 School applicants were especially resourceful at obtaining support 'in-kind' from parents and local businesses. This ranged from time to the supply of equipment – either free or at reduced price. A number especially highlighted the readiness of businesses within their local community to support the project once they heard about Forest Schools.
- 3.38 No other part of the UK has utilised WIG Challenge Funds for supporting Forest Schools. In al other areas they have been supported through a combination of core and project budgets allocated on a 'case by case' basis.

Additionality

- 3.39 In their enthusiasm for Forest Schools most could not conceive not having been awarded the grant and what impact this would have had on their project. The most common answer was that it would have gone ahead but at a significantly reduced scale and increased duration.
- 3.40 That there were no Forest Schools in the region before the launch of the grant and there are now at least sixteen indicates that the grant has had a significant impact on provision. Whilst there has been a general increase in Forest School provision across England it has not been on a comparable scale as to that in the East of England Region, again indicating that the grant has created additional capacity.

Risk Management

- 3.41 Engaging with an audience that has traditionally had little or no involvement with the FC, on a topic new to most, has inevitably involved a greater degree of risk than is associated with most FC support schemes. However, through a number of initiatives, some intentional and some not, this risk has been minimised. In undertaking this process, important lessons have been learnt for the FC in terms of engaging with wider audiences.
- 3.42 Risk has been minimised principally by working with a sector that has well defined and understood structures and practices itself. Largely working with organisations, rather than individuals, has also reinforced this aspect. A limited, but appropriate, scale of promotion has ensured that expectations have been largely met and resources have not been over committed.
- 3.43 Similarly, Forest Schools is itself an established (if not widely used) system with recognised training standards and procedures, and strong evidence of its beneficial effect from other countries. There was some

existing knowledge of the concept within the region and the embryo of a support network which could be used to assist applicants who were finding progress most challenging.

- 3.44 It should also be noted that, although less easily measured or defined, Forest Schools have attracted an audience that are strongly motivated with consistently high ethical standards. The grant schemes has supported what is seen as a positive initiative and attracted people who were already, at least to some extent, enthusiasts for the principles of outdoor or environmental education. This is essentially different to grant schemes that may be seeking to discourage 'bad practice' or limit individual land managers scope for action and it would be inappropriate to seek to extend lessons learnt from this scheme to such instances.

4.0 Conclusions & Recommendations

Conclusions

- 4.1 The East of England Forest Schools Woodland Improvement Grant has by any measure been a great success as judged by applicants and other stakeholders. It has achieved both direct and indirect benefits beyond its original expectations, has done so at reasonable cost and achieved additional outputs beyond that that could have been expected without it being in place.
- 4.2 One very beneficial outcome of the WIG has been the very positive light that the Forestry Commission and woodlands in general have been seen in by applicants. In particular, the implementation of the project and the support and encouragement given to applicants by Sunny Singh has been exemplary. The extent to which applicants have praised this aspect has surpassed any previous experience of the author in similar evaluation studies.
- 4.3 The overwhelming response of applicants and other stakeholders is that they wish to see the grant scheme continued. This could, of course be said to be a natural response, but given that many are unlikely to be significant beneficiaries of future funding (as they have already achieved the highest level of training and acquired most if not all of the equipment needed) it would appear this arises from a genuine interest in Forest Schools and a desire to see the initiative expand.
- 4.4 Those involved in the wider outdoor and environmental education sector expressed a strong preference for the FC to continue funding. It was considered that despite the very positive gains from Forest Schools they were not yet sufficiently numerous to have become 'mainstream' within Local Education Authorities and could not expect to attract significant core funding from them.
- 4.5 The Forest School WIG has created a level of interest and activity which whilst significantly greater than before is not so extensive or embedded within education in the region that it can be considered self-sustaining. For example, the number of trained Level 3 Leaders was such that if only a relatively small number left the region or were unable to continue their Forest School activities due to a variety of reasons (promotion, retirement, maternity/paternity leave etc.) the programme could quickly revert to previous levels of activity.
- 4.6 Using standard FC WIG application forms and guidance has presented considerable challenges to many applicants, however this has been overcome with the guidance outlined above. If the WIG is continued consideration should be given to how this could be improved.
- 4.7 Requiring every applicant, regardless of value of application, to enter a challenge fund type of grant, is of questionable benefit to both funder and applicant. A streamlined grant process for applications of under a certain level could attract a different type of applicant and provide cost savings for the FC.

- 4.8 Applicants have strongly appreciated the opportunity to meet others involved in Forest Schools and to learn from their experiences. They have also valued the support given to them on an ongoing basis by stakeholders in the Forest School community which has been enabled by the meetings conducted through Forest Schools East.

Recommendations

- 4.9 If funds are available then the region should give very strong consideration to the continuation of the Forest Schools WIG. This should be for a defined period (a further two to three years) during which the FC will seek to embed the benefits already gained by focussing on training and creating clusters of Forest Schools which can support and compliment one another. The FC should also use this time to reach agreement with LEA's for them to take on mainstream funding of Forest School activity after this period.
- 4.10 Given the low total number of applications compared to other WIG applicants, there is little justification for developing an application process (forms etc.) particular to the Forest Schools WIG. Instead the difficulties experienced by applicants should be overcome through the ongoing production and refinement and guidance notes and the availability of FC staff to explain the process. Simple 'Help Sheets' and 'FAQS' could provide answers to many of the more common questions.
- 4.11 If the Forest Schools WIG is continued, consideration should be given to introducing a streamlined application process (notwithstanding the comment in 4.10) for applications under a certain level. Given the distribution of applications to date, £1000 (grant aid value) would appear to be a sensible limit. These applications could be processed at any time, not having to wait for a challenge fund deadline, but would have to be subject to an overall limit, expressed as a percentage of the total annual budget, in order that funds were not fully allocated in this way. Furthermore, in order to ensure quality standards are maintained and risk minimised it is recommended that such grants only be awarded to applicants where a Level 3 Forest Schools trained leader is in post.
- 4.12 Consideration should also be given to introducing more than one deadline per year, in order to maintain interest and momentum in the process and to spread the workload for those processing the grants. This should also be timed such that it coincides with the school year so that Forest School leaders, teachers and administrators can build activity into timetables well in advance. It is recognised, however, that this may impact on the ability of training providers to run courses which need a minimum number of participants to be financially viable.

Succession and Mainstreaming

- 4.13 It is understood that the Forestry Commission Social Development Advisor who has overseen this scheme is to leave at the end of 2007 and will not be replaced. Any ongoing scheme will be implemented by the existing staff resource within East England Region. There will therefore be a need to ensure that the existing good practice exhibited to date is

continued and that mechanisms are created that will, over time, achieve the mainstreaming of Forest Schools.

- 4.14 Although the Forestry Commission has been the lead body in enabling Forest Schools in the region, this has involved a wider partnership. This should be maintained and reinforced, preferably with a small but effective steering group of active partners (FC, Greenlight Trust, LEA's. The Steering Group should monitor progress against a small number of essential criteria (e.g. number of Forest Schools in the region, number of Level 3 trained leaders etc.) and task individual organisations with actions for the future. Whilst the FC may chair this group in the early stages, it should be an aim to handover this position to, for example, an LEA within two to three years in order to assist the process of embedding Forest Schools within mainstream education as described above.
- 4.15 This Steering Group should report to a wider Forest Schools Forum which would meet annually with the objective of sharing best practice, creating networks and providing mutual support for Forest Schools Leaders. The use of guest speakers, question and answer sessions, practical workshops, visits to other regions and a variety of other tools should be utilised to maintain the forums attractiveness to both working and aspiring Forest School Leaders. Given the comment regarding location in 3.2, this forum should seek to move around the region.
- 4.16 Consideration should be given to the creation of a number of Forest School 'Champions' who can advocate their extension into the wider community. These should be people who have direct experience of Forest Schools – either as a leader, parent, teacher, or supporter – and who have experienced the wide range of benefits that Forest Schools provide, and are able to put this over to audiences. They could be supported through the provision of a standard Forest Schools 'PowerPoint' presentation and promotional materials. It should be an objective to have at least one champion in each LEA. Champions may need to have expenses reimbursed either by the FC or from their own organisation, the latter being preferable as a means of extending the financial support for Forest Schools.
- 4.17 The Forest Schools East website should be maintained and reinforced as a medium for promoting and sharing best practice and creating links between practitioners in the region. The development of an e-news facility should be considered in order to promote return traffic to the website.
- 4.18 Within the FC Region, one officer should be tasked with overall responsibility for overseeing (but not necessarily undertaking) the ongoing implementation of the scheme. This person should be supported by the Woodland and Administrative Officers who should be provided with the necessary training and support on taking on this new type of work. Most importantly it will be necessary to create common understanding of the purpose of Forest Schools, and the unique needs of a client base that will not typically have had any previous contact with the FC. Strong FC Officer presence should be encouraged at the Forest Schools Forum in order to assist this process.

Appendices

Appendix I Woodland Improvement Grant Guide – EWGS5

See www.forestry.gov.uk/eastengland for an up to date version of this document.

Appendix II News Release – Forest Schools East – bringing lessons to life

FORESTRY COMMISSION

NEWS RELEASE NO: 9130

Forest School East- bringing learning to life

The Forestry Commission, East England Conservancy is celebrating the success of the first year of a scheme, which encourages people to explore and discover the natural environment.

The Forest Schools East - Woodland Improvement Grant Challenge Fund will help Forest Schools develop in the East of England, giving participants in the region the opportunity to explore and learn in their local environment.

Forest School sessions take place in, a secure area of woodland, which acts as an outdoor classroom where people can explore, investigate and discover the natural environment. Sessions are organised and run by Qualified Forest School Leaders.

While the Leader will have a planned range of potential activities, with natural materials, it is the participants themselves that determine the range and scope of the activities.

Forest School sessions provide a valuable teaching tool for a wide range of curriculum subjects, and is an excellent way to support and enrich the National Curriculum. Sessions can help to bring alive a range of subjects from Biology and Sciences, Maths, Design and Technology, PE, Art and English.

Research into the Forest School process has shown the combination of freedom and responsibility is particularly beneficial to children with little or no confidence or challenging behaviour. A non-classroom environment gives children increased stimulation and encourages a greater learning potential.

Sunny Singh, Social Development Advisor for the Forestry Commission in the East of England explained:

“The Forest School process is inspirational, it provides an excellent opportunity to bring learning to life. It gives children, young people and adults the opportunity to explore and learn in a constructive way increasing self-confidence, self-esteem and provides all the participants with a sense of belonging and ownership of their local surroundings.”

“I am delighted we had such success in our first year of the Forest School East - Woodland Improvement Grant –Challenge Fund in the East of England. The first

year of the grant enabled 13 applicants to develop Forest Schools in our region. The applications ranged from individual schools, environmental charities, NGOs and Local Education Authorities. A judging panel of Forestry Commission and independent members judged all applications and approved 13 schemes, awarding £64,000.

“Through the Woodland Improvement Grant we have enabled a broad range of Forest Schools. These included provision of Forest School sessions to school children, youth groups, excluded children, special schools, transition groups (pupils who are identified as requiring extra support to prepare for Secondary School) and a SEN project directly targeted at children with Special Educational Needs.”

The Forest School East- Woodland Improvement Grant (WIG) Challenge Fund offers schools, sport, youth and environmental charities and organisations the opportunity to apply for a grant, which will support setting up a Forest School site.

Forest Schools East also offers training for teachers to investigate and lead their own Forest Schools. This is supported by the Green Light Trust, an environment-based Suffolk charity that will provide the training in the region, allowing participants to train and learn in their local environment.

The overall aim is to set up Forest Schools throughout the region under the banner of Forest School East.

Notes to Editors

For further press information contact Sunny Singh on 01842 815544/ 07979760592 or email sundeep.singh@forestry.gsi.gov.uk

For further information on the Regional Woodland Strategy visit the website www.woodlandforlife.net

For further information on the Forestry Commission visit our website on www.forestry.gov.uk

For further information on Forest School East visit our website on www.forest-schools-east.org/

Appendix III East of England Forest School Challenge Fund – Guidance Note

See www.forestry.gov.uk/eastengland for an up to date version of this document.

Appendix IV Woodland Improvement Grant Application Forms – EWGS1 & EWGS5

See www.forestry.gov.uk/eastengland for an up to date version of this document.

Appendix V Applicants Questionnaire

Marketing & Publicity

- How did you first find out about the Forest School WIG?
- Had you heard of Forest Schools before this?
- Did you attend the FS Conference in January 2006

Applicants

- What was your motivation in applying?
- How does the activities funded through the WIG relate to your other activities?

Partnerships & Networking

- Have you worked in partnership with any other schools / organisations etc.?
- If not, do you think it would have been useful to do so?

Process

- How did you find the application process?
- Were you given adequate support in compiling your application?
- Were you kept informed as the process went on?
- If appropriate, did you feel you were given adequate reasons for refusal?
- Since approval what interaction with the FC have you had?
- Has the claims process gone smoothly?

Outputs & Outcomes

- Have the outputs been as anticipated
- Have there been any wider benefits e.g. employment, woodland management, recreation?

Costs

- Was any other external funding drawn down?
- How much applicants funding has been used?

Additionality

- If you hadn't got the grant what do you think would have happened? (nothing / delayed / reduced scale)
- How has this compared to other grants you have applied for?

Any other comments?

Appendix VI List of Applicants Interviewed

Gill Ansell, Ridgewell School

Lawrie Clarke, The Wildlife Trust for Beds, Cambs, Northants & Peterborough

Rob Coleman, The National Trust

Ashley Cooper, H.P. Cooper (Farms) Ltd.

Susan Falch-Lovesey, Norfolk County Council

Carolyn Gardner, Codicote School

Nigel Hughes, The Greenlight Trust

Nicola Harrison, Woodside First School & Nursery

Debbie McKenzie, The Wildlife Trust for Beds, Cambs, Northants & Peterborough (Grafham Nature Reserve)

Marika Mears, St. Martin at Shouldham CEVA Primary School

Simon Perry, Daws Hall Centre

Anna Rawl, Essex Wildlife Trust

Joanna Shelton, The Box Moor Trust

Amanda Sumner, Forests For Our Children

Mrs Waller, Wheatcroft Primary School