

CLOtC accredited forests for self-led learning visits

The Council for Learning Outside the Classroom ([CLOtC](#)) is the national voice for learning outside the classroom. The Forestry Commission is proud to be working with the CLOtC to create and improve opportunities for self-led learning on the public forest estate.

We are working towards [CLOtC Site Provider Awards](#) for Forestry Commission sites across England. This award recognises organisations which actively welcome schools onto their site/s for self-led visits and ensure that the sites and any other services provided meet the needs of schools.

CLOtC accredited site: Top Lodge, Fineshade Wood, Northamptonshire

Top Lodge Visitor Centre has easy access to walking and cycling trails, as well as a café and play areas, making it an ideal place to bring your class or any other group for a learning visit to explore the ancient and very beautiful Fineshade Wood.

Fineshade Wood is part of the public forest estate, which is made up of more than 1500 woods and forests in England that are cared for by the Forestry Commission. We practise multi-purpose sustainable forestry: multi-purpose means that our forests are managed, not just to supply timber, but also as valuable wildlife habitats and places for visitors to enjoy; sustainable means that we follow long term forest design plans, so that the public forest estate continues to provide timber, and benefits for people and wildlife into the future.

Top Lodge attracts about 100 000 visitors per year. In the summer months, the site itself can be busy, but trails leading into the surrounding woodland allow you to leave the hustle and bustle behind within a few minutes walk.

Example school visits

- **EYFS** – Understanding the world – exploring different habitats to look for minibeasts, discussing where they live and why; this could be extended with a visit to the wildlife hide to think about and (hopefully) observe other forest wildlife
- **Primary school** – History / geography – look for evidence of how the land has been used in the past – iron smelting, coppicing etc, and consider how previous land uses have affected the way the site looks today; investigate how, when and why red kites were reintroduced to the local area
- **Secondary school** – Year 7 settling in, getting to know each other – working in teams to follow a trail, find a suitable place to 'settle' then building shelters to survive in the woods; alternatively, why not extend your visit and stay overnight? Our environmentally friendly Danish shelters, built by local craftsmen, from timber felled in the local woodlands, are situated in Fineshade Wood and nearby Fermyn Wood – you can hike between the two; both sites have a purpose-built fire site and a composting toilet.
- **GCSE / A-level** – Geography fieldwork – environmental impact of visitors to the forest, and how this can be managed / alleviated – including a look at the features of an environmentally friendly visitor centre

Site [webpage](#)

- has information about trails, site facilities, opening times, parking charges, directions and events

On-site facilities

- Café, visitor centre, play area, ample parking for cars and coaches (charges apply), toilets (plus additional children's toilets which may be opened on request), cycle shop and hire, Little Barn (classroom / meeting room with seating for up to 40 people – book via [Top Lodge Café](#)), picnic tables and wildlife hide
- The best place for mobile phone signal is at the Horsebox Car Park; there are no payphones onsite

Surrounding woodland

- Within five minutes walk of Top Lodge is a variety of mixed woodland – different species and ages of trees including ancient woodland, wetland habitats and open spaces.
- There is an additional play area for older children located about 15 minutes walk from Top Lodge.
- There are three waymarked walking trails from the site, including a 2-mile all-ability trail; there is also a horse riding trail and a family cycle trail, with some more challenging additional loops for cyclists who want to test their skills.

Self-led learning opportunities

- Woodland activities – trees, minibeasts, habitats, shelterbuilding (see FC [downloads](#) and [lesson plans](#))
- Active / sporting – [cycling](#), walking, mapreading
- Hire a '[Ranger in a Bag](#)' at Fineshade
 - Ranger in a Bag (RIAB) is the Forestry Commission's bookable self-led activity pack for school groups
 - RIAB contains all the equipment and instructions needed to lead learning activities in the forest (no experience necessary!), as well as introductory and plenary activities
 - RIAB is suitable for a group of up to 35 children aged 4-11
 - RIAB topics available at Fineshade include: Woodland Art, Shelterbuilding, Minibeasts, Sensory Explorers, Animal Detectives
 - For more information, [email](#) or phone the learning team

Local Forestry Commission contacts

- The local Forestry Commission learning team is based at Sherwood Pines Forest Park [email](#) or telephone 01623 821479
- Visitor Service staff are on site at Fineshade every day of the year apart from Christmas Day

Planning your visit

- **Contact the FC learning team at Sherwood Pines** – we'd like to know you are coming and, depending on your plans, there may be a booking form to complete
- **Pre-visit** – we strongly recommend that you make a pre-visit to the site before bringing your group – you'll need to know where to park, where the toilets are, where and how you will carry out your activities; you'll need to be able to write your risk assessment and will also be able to purchase trail leaflets and maps – from the cycle shop and Top Lodge Café.
- **Health and safety** – we carry out regular safety checks of the area around Top Lodge and of the waymarked trails; we do not however, check every path and every part of the forest; if you are bringing a group to the forest, it is your responsibility to carry out a pre-visit and write your own risk assessment; we cannot provide you with a site risk assessment because the forest is a variable environment, which changes as a result of weather conditions, time of year, forest operations etc; we do offer a [sample risk assessment](#), which may be of use, when you are writing your own and a [guide to group leader responsibilities](#); if a member of your group has an accident while visiting Top Lodge, please let the site staff or the learning team know as soon as possible

Accessibility

- 5 dedicated disabled parking bays 60m from visitor centre entrance
- Unisex accessible toilet in the main atrium of the visitor centre
- An all-ability waymarked trail, and wildlife hide
- Sensory garden
- Electric bikes for hire from Fineshade Cycling
- Hearing loop available at the Forest Office, (next to the visitor centre, open weekdays only)
- For more information, please see our [detailed access statement](#)

After your visit

- **Feedback** – we'd like to know how you get on with your self-led visit to Top Lodge and have provided a short [online survey](#)
- **Further opportunities** – if you would like to find out more about learning opportunities on the public forest estate, please [email](#) and ask to be put onto our mailing list