

# Better Start Bradford Innovation Hub

## Forest Schools Play

### Final Report

### October 2023

*This is a report provided by the Better Start Bradford Innovation Hub (BSBIH) for Better Start Bradford and Forest Schools Play.*

*The document provides an overview of the Forest Schools Play performance and findings from the implementation evaluation and ethnographic study including an interpretation of these findings by BSBIH. The design of this evaluation is described in more detail in the Evaluation Plan Summary, which was approved by key stakeholders from the BSBIH and BSB.*

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Produced for Better Start Bradford

# Executive Summary

## Project Background

Access to the outdoors and natural environment is fundamental to healthy child development. The Forest Schools Play project was commissioned by Better Start Bradford in response to environmental inequalities across the Better Start Bradford area and in recognition that fewer children were achieving a good level of development at age five when compared with the Bradford and England averages. As well as having fewer parks and green spaces than other areas of Bradford, it was found that barriers existed to families accessing those spaces including negative perceptions of quality and safety. Forest Schools Play aimed to work with nursery settings to increase families' confidence and skills in accessing the outdoors and natural environment through play, and promote children's wellbeing and development.

The project works with qualified Forest School practitioners in partnership with early year's settings to reach children and their families attending nurseries in the three Better Start Bradford wards. The central component of the project is a programme of nine 2 hour weekly sessions for groups of 3 year old children taking place in local green spaces, parks, and woodlands. This was originally a ten week course but was adapted at the end of Year 4 to make delivery more manageable. Parents and caregivers are encouraged to attend sessions alongside their child to share experiences and develop their own skills. The project also provide L1 and L3 Forest Schools training to early years staff and parents with aim of creating a sustainable culture of outdoor provision in nurseries and amongst families. In addition, the project has also run stand alone Family Play Sessions for local families in parks and green spaces.

## Evaluation Aims

At the time the project was designed there was no robust evidence for the benefit of Forest Schools for 3 year olds as most evaluations had focused on provision for primary school age children. The evaluation therefore set out to increase the evidence base. It aimed to provide a clear picture of project implementation, including recruitment and reach of families, retention of participants and completion of the project, and parent and caregiver satisfaction using project monitoring data. In the first year of the project an ethnographic study was completed which aimed to validate aspects of the logic model by exploring the key components of forest schools with 3 year old children and identifying suitable outcomes.

## Key Findings

Forest Schools was assessed against three key progression criteria related to completion, implementation, and satisfaction.



### Implementation

Implementation refers to the number of sessions delivered with attendance.

It was anticipated that the project would deliver 485 sessions, they have therefore achieved 93% of their target.



### Completion

Completion refers to the number of children who attended either 7/10 week sessions or 6/9 week sessions.

It was anticipated that 411 would complete the Forest Schools programme, they have therefore achieved 82% of their target.



### Satisfaction

Satisfaction relates to the proportion of families with a median score of 4 or more on project satisfaction questionnaires.

It was anticipated that 80% of respondents would have a median score of 4 or more, the project have therefore exceeded their target.

# Executive Summary

## Key findings

**The Forest Schools Play project has been successfully delivered in line with the logic model, and has been close to meeting anticipated figures for all progression criteria.** It has demonstrated consistently high levels of recruitment and completion despite the challenges created by COVID-19.

The project is felt to be valuable by parents, carers, and nursery staff and a qualitative study suggests potential benefits to both children and parents, with particular note of children's social and emotional development. Following the first year of evaluation a number of plausible outcomes were identified and added to the project logic model:

- Social and Emotional: confidence; attention; cooperation; anxiety; independence; overcoming fears; caring for and understanding themselves and others, and social skills and relationships
- Language and communication outcomes: vocabulary; use of words and full sentences; listening skills
- Physical development: physical activity; fine and gross motor skills; ability to move and be safe in the diverse and complex physical environment of natural spaces

The training element of the project has been challenging, however, more early years staff than anticipated have completed the Level 3 qualification. This has promising implications for sustainability. However, it has not been possible to evaluate whether those completing the training go on to use these new skills in their settings and reports from the project suggest this may not be the case.

### Recommendations for practice

The main recommendation for delivery is that this project is of high quality and proven fidelity and should be supported to continue in the current model of delivery. We encourage the project and BSB especially to make use of findings from this report to promote the project and seek funding for it.

The goal of sustainability through the training provision should continue to be pursued, with a particular focus on gaining the buy-in of school and nursery leadership team. This process may be supported through evidence from this evaluation, particularly the qualitative work, from the most engaged settings so far, and from wider evidence of the value of forest schools (mostly at older ages) within the existing literature.

### Recommendations for future evaluation

The project should continue to evaluate their delivery in whatever form that takes. Ideally the model for delivery and evaluation developed with Better Start Bradford would be replicated in future as there is already evidence for the fidelity of this structure.

The project currently has a confirmed logic model and has shown that they are able to deliver with fidelity. This means that if delivery were able to continue in the current model the project may be in a position to progress to a higher level evaluation of efficacy and/or effectiveness. The focus of this evaluation should be on the social and emotional outcomes for participating children. More work is needed to establish and confirm appropriate measures and how these could be collected.

## Project Background

### About the Forest Schools Play Project

Access to the outdoors and natural environment is fundamental to healthy child development. The Forest Schools Play project was commissioned by Better Start Bradford in response to environmental inequalities across the Better Start Bradford area and in recognition that fewer children were achieving a good level of development at age five when compared with the Bradford and England averages. As well as having fewer parks and green spaces than other areas of Bradford, it was found that barriers existed to families accessing those spaces including negative perceptions of quality and safety. Forest Schools Play aimed to work with nursery settings to increase children and families' confidence and skills in accessing the outdoors and natural environment through play, and promote children's wellbeing and development.

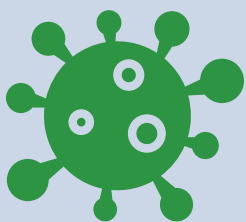
The project works with qualified Forest School practitioners in partnership with early year's settings to reach children and their families attending nurseries in the three Better Start Bradford wards. The central component of the project is a programme of nine, weekly, two hour sessions for groups of three year old children taking place in local green spaces, parks, and woodlands. This was originally a ten week course but was adapted at the end of Year 4 to make delivery more manageable. Parents and caregivers are encouraged to attend sessions alongside their child to share experiences and develop their own skills.

The project also provide Level 1 and Level 3 Forest Schools training to early years staff and parents of preschool children with aim of creating a sustainable culture of outdoor provision in nurseries and amongst families. Level 1 Forest School Training is a three day commitment and introduces the concepts of Forest Schools. The Level 3 training includes 10 days of guided learning which would count as completing the course. For those wishing to qualify to lead Forest Schools sessions there are 20 assessment tasks including leading six Forest Schools sessions, as well as compulsory outdoor paediatric first aid training.

In addition to the nine week programme, the project has also run stand alone Family Play Sessions for local families in parks and green spaces. Sessions are free to join and work on a drop in basis.

The project started delivery in summer term of 2018 and continued during school term time (autumn, spring, and summer), with delivery due to conclude in Spring 2024.

### COVID-19 Impact on the project



Delivery of Forest Schools was significantly impacted by the first period of social restrictions (from March 2020) with no delivery during the whole of the summer term. In Year 3 delivery was also impacted with lockdowns and term time meaning delivery was only possible for 13 weeks of the year. at least one setting halted involvement for the duration of all lockdowns and nurseries frequently had to close for short periods due to a confirmed cases of amongst children or staff.

It is worth noting that where possible, the project continued to work in nurseries with key worker children but this is not included in evaluation figures because the groups were not necessarily eligible children (based on age and area). Child and nursery staff illness continued to impact children completing the course well into 2022.

## Project Background

### Impact on the project



Level 1 and Level 3 training continued to run with reduced numbers in line with public health restrictions and this impacted the number of staff and parents receiving training. Parents were also unable to attend group sessions due to the risk of infection. However, the project did offer 121 sessions for parents during this time. Each course required significantly more staff time to be spent on administration, in order to manage a more rigorous risk assessment process for themselves and the nursery settings.

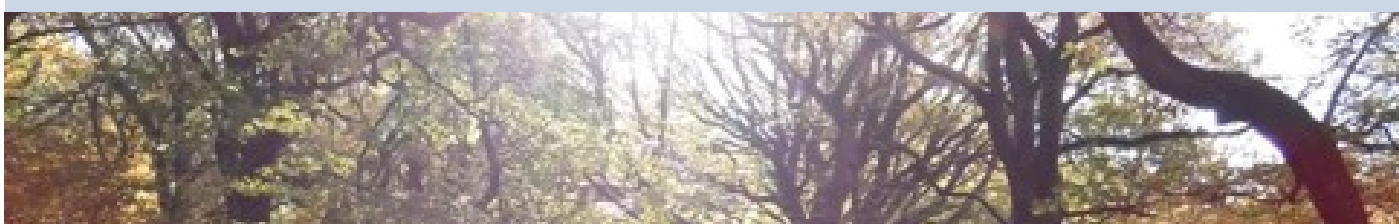
The project continued to perform relatively well and appears to have successfully adapted to the changing circumstances during the period.

### Data Quality



The project worked effectively with BSBIH to achieve a good level of data collection using a combination of SystmOne and their own record keeping spreadsheets. Data has been provided consistently on time and with good accuracy. There were some data missing from the project's own spreadsheets regarding session details (such as weather conditions), however data accuracy on SystmOne appears to have been high.

Going forward, the project clearly has robust practices in entering data, however, beyond BSB they will need to find an alternative to SystmOne for data capture and this may require some adaptations and could effect data quality in the short term as the project adjusts. The consistency and efficiency of the project with regards to data suggests that while a change may be disruptive they have every ability to work with data systems.

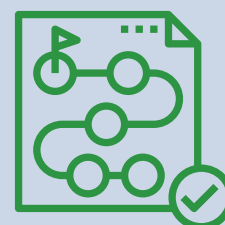


## Qualitative findings

*In 2019 BSBIH initiated a piece of qualitative research into the outcomes of Forest Schools for under four yearolds. Below is a summary of that work.*

### Method

Ethnography was chosen as an observational evaluative method suitable for including the perspectives of three-year-olds. Twenty-one Forest School sessions of two nursery groups were observed September-December 2018, followed by 14 in-depth interviews with eight parents, four nursery staff and two Forest School practitioners.



### Results

#### The forest schools experience

One theory detailing why Forest Schools are beneficial is that a more diverse environment provides more opportunities for play and creativity. In this evaluation children were observed playing with 20 categories of natural materials and environments. Over 80 different play activities were observed including sensory play, building, collecting, caring, creating, observing and experimenting. Parents attended some park sessions but found transport a problem to attend sessions in the woods.

#### Outcomes

The primary benefit of the Forest School project appears to be for the social and emotional wellbeing of the children, and to an extent the parents and siblings. Improvement was observed in the following areas: confidence; attention; cooperation; anxiety; independence; overcoming fears; caring for and understanding themselves and others, and social skills and relationships. There also appeared to be benefits in areas of language, with improvements observed in vocabulary; use of words and full sentences, rather than the use of non-verbal communication. Potential improvements in physical development, and understanding of science, mathematics, and arts were also observed. The Forest School also appeared to have potential personal and professional benefits for nursery staff and parents.

#### Practicalities

There are numerous practical challenges involved in getting a large group of 3-year-olds ready and transported to the Forest Schools locations including clothing, toileting, transport, food, and drink. Leadership, from the point of view of a 3-year-old, could be confusing when parents, nursery staff and Forest School staff were all in the same session.

#### Risks

A number of risks were identified but these were managed well using a three-stage process: a general site risk assessment, on the day and constant matching of individual children's behaviour or mood to the risks in the environment. Perceived risks/anxieties among children and staff emerged as a significant theme. Many of the children had not been any further than their home, nursery or local playground, and were also new to nursery and still adjusting to being separated from their parents. Starting off the sessions in their local park and then going to the woods helped children adjust to their new environments.



## Qualitative findings

### Recommendations

It is feasible and acceptable to deliver Forest Schools for three year-olds through nursery settings using an experienced Forest School play provider. Attendance was high, relatively consistent and both parents and nursery staff saw the value in their children's participation in the project.

The key outcomes for future evaluation should focus on social and emotional development of children, with secondary outcomes of language development and physical activity. The logic model developed through this evaluation should be used to revise the service design of Forest Schools for three year-olds. The optimal measurement scales and timing of assessments requires further consideration within service design review.

There are many practical considerations for preparing and transporting children to Forest School settings. Awareness of the barriers and facilitators will aid these practical challenges in future delivery.

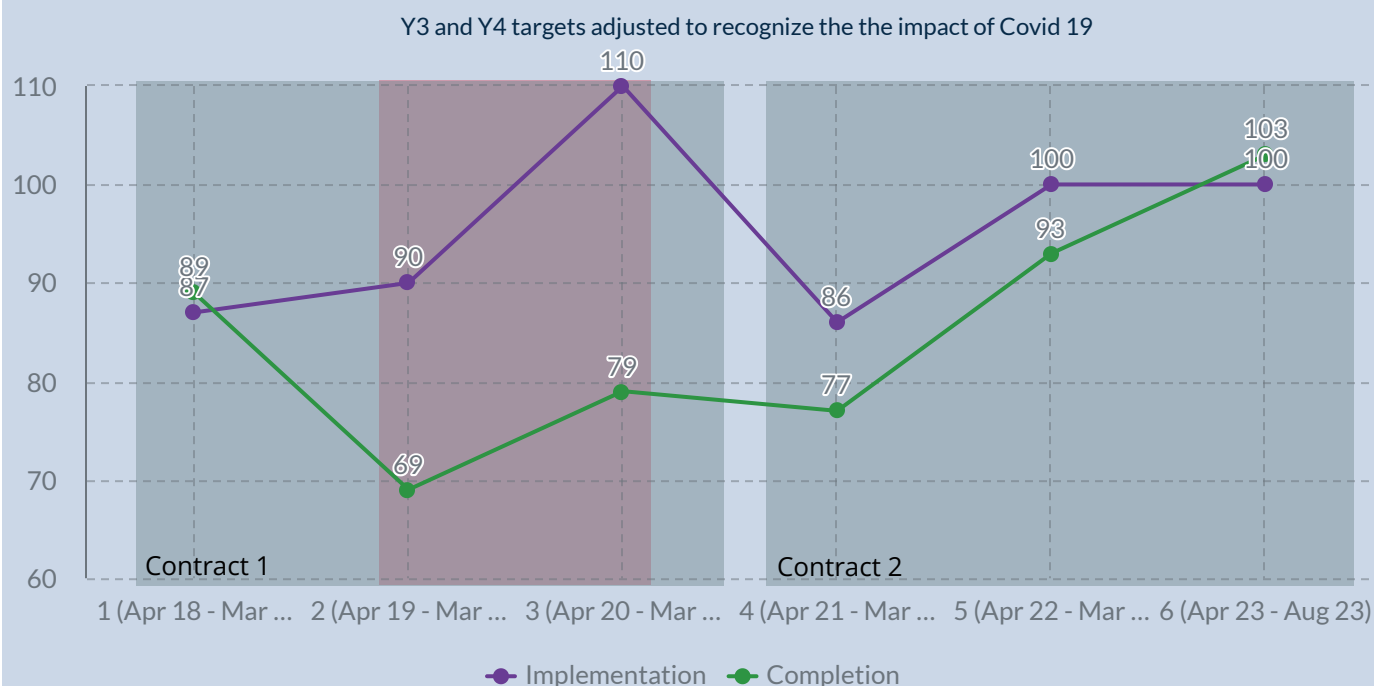
As with any activity involving small children in public spaces, there were numerous risks which were safely managed using a three-staged risk management approach. There were also numerous perceived risks for children that can be managed with experienced staff. The use of the potential risks and protective factors summary in this report will further help to support these in future delivery.

This evaluation shows potential benefits for Forest Schools for both children and their parents. It does not provide any insight into the outcomes/challenges for any other age group. We would therefore recommend that BSB role out and evaluate Forest Schools for 3 year-olds before considering a programme for even younger children.



# Evaluation Findings

## Implementation Evaluation



This graph tracks the project's performance as a percentage of the anticipated figure.

We note that in years two and three, the anticipated figures were adjusted down significantly due to the impacts of Covid-19 lockdowns; this impacted around 40 children who were due to complete in April 2020 during the first lockdown and even with the adjustment of expectations that year which was calculated based on missed weeks of delivery, this did not fully account for the entire lost cohort.

In the second year impacted by Covid-19 related restrictions, the project performed well in terms of implementation, but numbers of completing children remained low. Various factors may have impacted this, including, children missing weeks of nursery due to Covid-19 infections within their families, and other infections increasing as social mixing increased. Also ongoing practices put in place by nurseries meant that children were often grouped in 'bubbles' that included a mix of eligible and ineligible children and the project delivered to these bubbles regardless of eligibility in order to reach eligible children, this meant 'full' courses would not always have a full course's worth of eligible children.

The first year after restrictions were lifted appears to have continued to challenge delivery for the project and again this may at least be partly attributed to the increase in general illness in nursery aged children after a period of relative isolation, although project staff also note adverse weather, school closures, and religious festivals playing a part. However, the project delivered 93 sessions with attendance in that year - up from only 33 in the year before - and was back on pre-Covid targets. So although the performance against targets appears low in year four, the project was working back up towards target and has maintained an upward trajectory since then.

Overall, there is a rough correlation between the number of sessions and the number of completing children, suggesting that the assumptions about how delivery would work that were made during service design were broadly correct. Particularly in the final two years, the project appears to have shown that they are able to deliver key aspects of the project inline with the service design.



# Evaluation Findings

## Implementation Evaluation

### Did the project run Forest School sessions as set out in the service design?

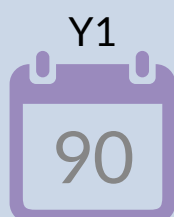


This refers to the 10 and 9 week courses and sessions are considered delivered if they take place with any level of attendance from children and families.

Overall the project delivered 450 Forest Schools sessions between April 2018 and July 2023. This equates to **93% of the anticipated figure**, with changes to delivery due to COVID-19 taken into account. This is also the equivalent of 48 full courses delivered across the 6 years.

Initially the project aimed to deliver 12x10 week courses per year, equating to 120 sessions. In 2022 this was adjusted to 12x9 weeks courses per year and so the target for sessions became 108.

### The targets across the years of delivery were as follows:



Y1

90



Y2

113

Adjusted down from 120 due to covid lockdown



Y3

30

Adjusted down from 120 due to covid lockdown



Y4

108

Course length reduced from 10 to 9 weeks



Y5

108

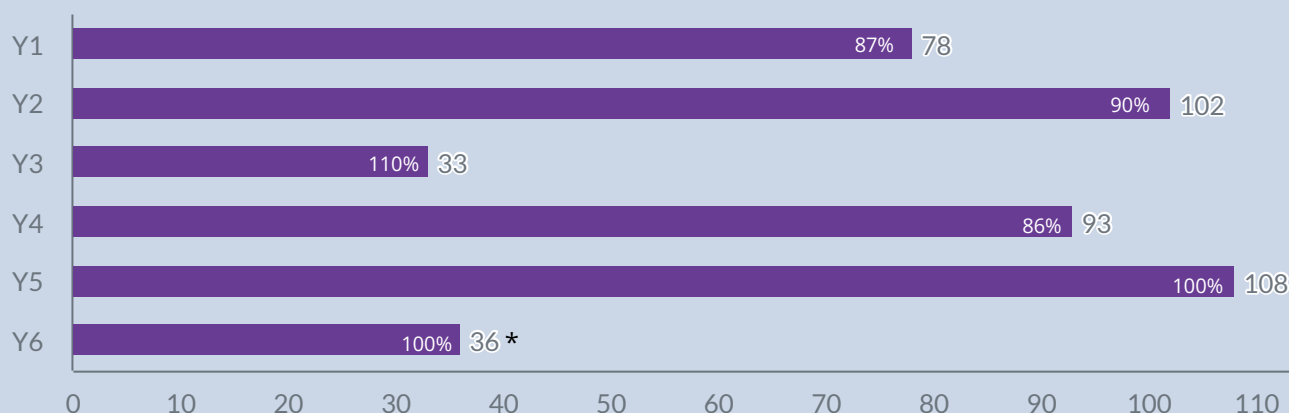


Y6

36

Adjusted down from 108 to reflect 4 months of delivery

### Sessions delivered by year



\* Note that Y6 represents only a 4 month period

While the COVID-19 lockdown restrictions significantly impacted delivery, it is evident that the project was successful in delivering whenever this was allowed. The project was able to rapidly increase delivery post-Covid restrictions, quickly exceeding the pre-pandemic levels; in the last two years they achieved their highest levels of 'per month' delivery.

# Evaluation Findings

## Implementation Evaluation

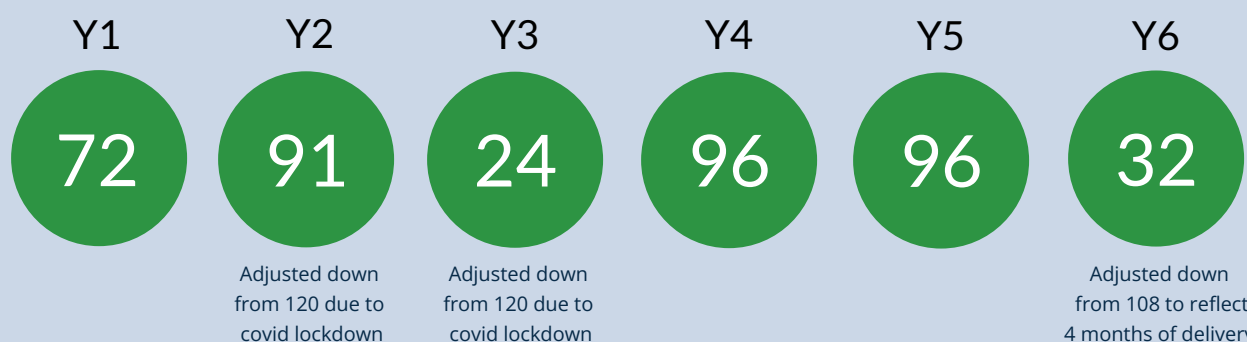
### Did children complete the project as anticipated?

342

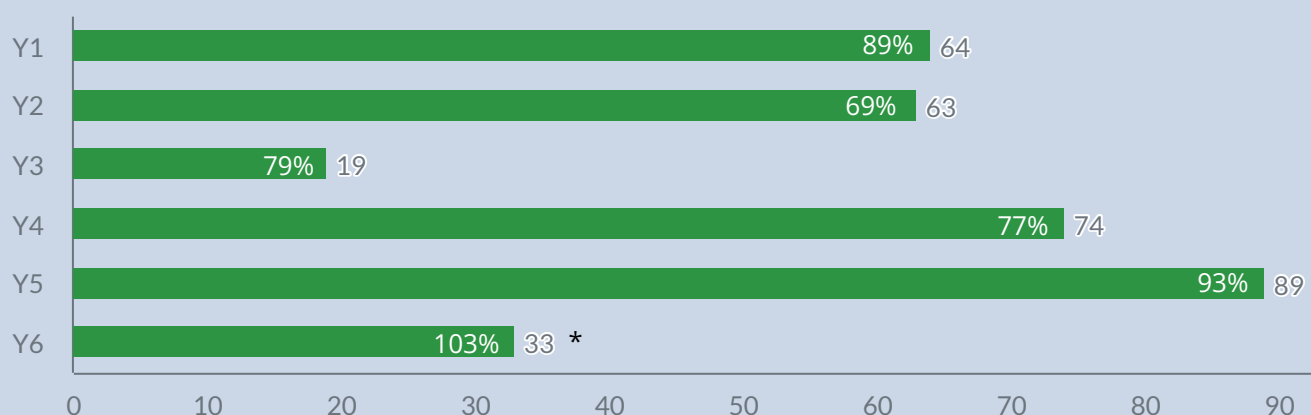
To complete the project children needed to attend either 7 sessions of the 10 week course (in Years 1-3), or 6 sessions of the 9 week course (Years 4 to 6). Overall 342 children completed the Forest Schools course between April 2018 and July 2023. This equates to **83% of the anticipated completers**, with changes to delivery due to Covid 19 taken into account.

Covid 19 had a significant impact on the number of children able to complete with an entire group impacted at the beginning of the first lockdown period. It may be that lasting impacts of the pandemic including young children experiencing more bouts of normal childhood illness as lockdowns were eased as well ongoing covid cases.

### The targets across the years of delivery were as follows:



### Completion by year



\* Note that Y6 represents only a 4 month period

Figures suggest that levels of completion were more significantly effected by COVID-19 than delivery which is likely to be as a result of the ongoing impact on children's health with illness taking children out of sessions more frequently than anticipated. Despite this, the project increased these figures especially throughout the second contract period (Y4-Y6) and have shown in Y6 that they are able to take children to completion of the project as set out in the service design.

# Participant Flow Diagram

## Implementation Evaluation



Over the course of the project, 25 nurseries were recruited and participated. It was anticipated that 12 nurseries would participate (9 in Y1), with each nursery having one Forest Schools course run, and this was achieved.

It was anticipated that 80% of participants would complete the course and the data indicates that actually 61% of participants completed.. Covid significantly impacted this with 41 (~7%) children having their course cancelled due to Covid precautions or rules. Another 39 (~7%) moved away, exceeded the maximum age for inclusion or were discounted from completion for other reasons (~2%) such as ill health or parents saying the child did not like the sessions.

A fairly large group of children, 81 (~14%) 'nearly completed' attending 4-5 sessions. These children may have accessed many of the possible benefits of the course despite not completing. The data does not provide clear insights into reasons that these children did not attend the full course, but this number will include both children whose course was cancelled due to Covid and children who continued attending sessions up until the last week, but had absences during the course, perhaps due to illness, holidays or other personal reasons.

25  
Nurseries recruited

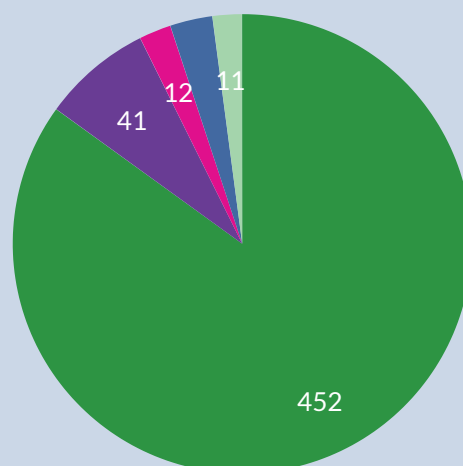
559  
Children participated in any sessions

63 - 2-3 sessions  
81 - 4-5 sessions  
186 - parents attended a session

342  
Children completed forest schools

452 children (81%) participated in the course until it ended. This is 90 more than met the completion criteria and suggests that while children may not have attended sufficient sessions to be classed as a completer, children are not dropping out of the project. Anecdotally a range of factors influenced non-completion including school strikes, snow days, nursery closures, and religious festivals as well as individual absences by children.

Participants by endings



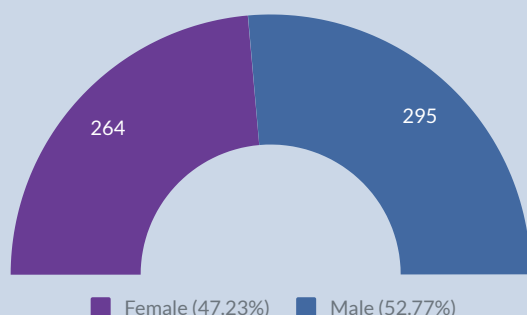
Course ended (84.96%)  
Course or service cancelled - Coronavirus Precaution (7.71%)  
Moved Out of Area (2.26%) Reached maximum age (3.01%) Other (2.07%)

## Implementation Evaluation

### What were the characteristics of participating children and families?

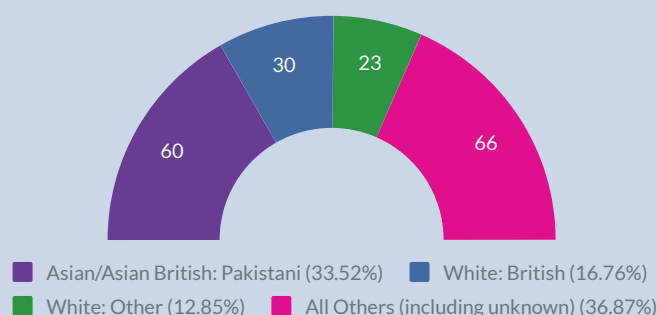
Data reported here relates to children and families who attended at least one Forest Schools session; children were selected to participate by the nursery settings. Sex and ethnicity are reported for children only.

Sex



The project reached slightly more male children than female children. We do not have the data to interpret this further, but it may be a place for further evaluation in future in order to establish whether this is demographic or has other reasons.

Ethnicity



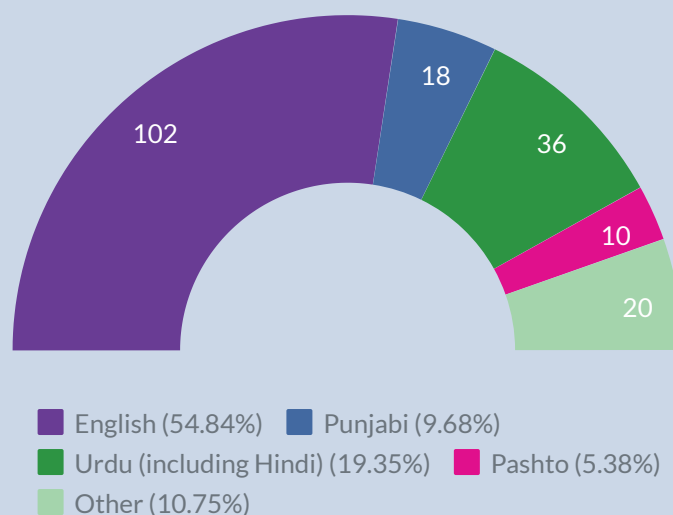
The project reached fewer Asian/Asian British Pakistani families than expected based on the demographics of the BSB area (typically around 50-60% Asian Pakistani). They reach approximately the proportion of White British and White Other families and a higher proportions of other nationalities, compared to the BSB area as a whole.

### What language were spoken by participating families?

Language data relates to families' main language as recorded in SystmOne.

Nearly 80% of participating families were fluent in English, although only around 55% had it as their main language. In the first three years there were families recorded as having no English and in the first year, five sessions were supported by an interpreter. In years two and three no language support was used and it is assumed families with no English were supported to take by staff or other parents who were able to interpret.

Main languages among participants



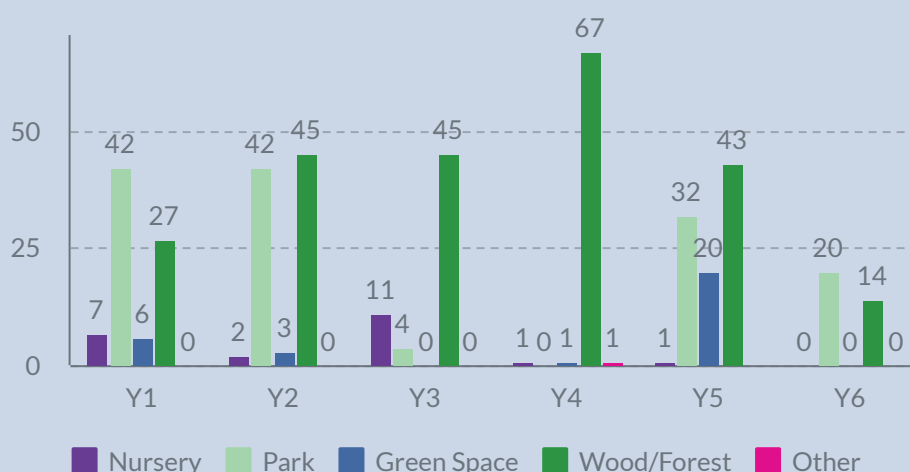
## Implementation Evaluation

### How were sessions organised?

The figures refer to any session that took place with attendance and was recorded on the project's internal spreadsheets; the number of sessions recorded here is slightly fewer than were found on SystmOne, with a total of 411.

The project aimed to run as many sessions as possible in woodland areas with parks being the next best option. Across all years the project achieved the vast majority of sessions taking place in woodlands and parks with Y4 being a standout, as 97% of sessions taking place in the woods. Barriers to running sessions in woodlands included nursery staff and transport availability. The project worked closely with settings to increase staff confidence in getting to and using both woodlands and parks.

### Session locations



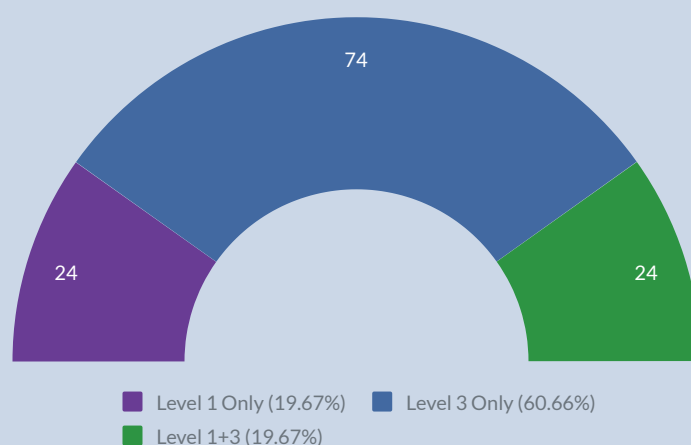
Overall the sessions allowed for 2hrs including preparation and travel time. The project typically spent between 75-85 minutes at the venue, with approximately 15 minutes taken in preparations and 20-25 minutes typically required for travel to and from the venue. The minimum time spent at a venue was 20 minutes; a few instances of adverse weather and on one occasion a dangerous dog required a session to be abandoned due to safety concerns.

Average times remained fairly static across the years, although it appears that post-covid there was an increase in average time at the venues.

The project aimed to deliver courses alongside trained staff and parents in order to develop their skills and confidence to provide outdoor play independently.

In total 122 sessions were co-delivered with trainees. The majority of these (61%) were delivered with Level 3 trainees only.

These figures only apply to the second contract period.



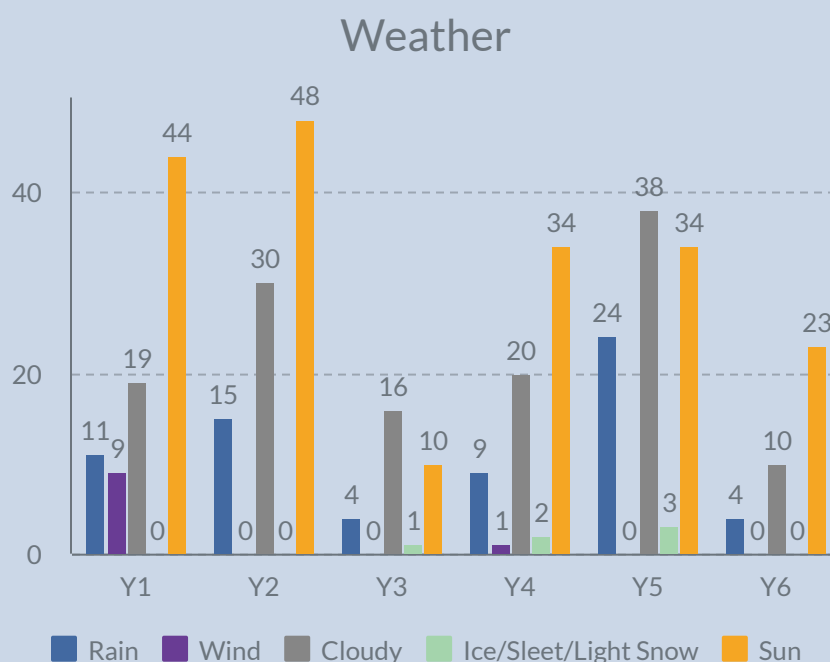
## Implementation Evaluation

### What was the weather like?

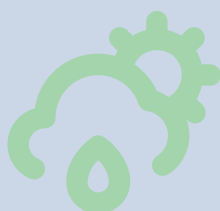
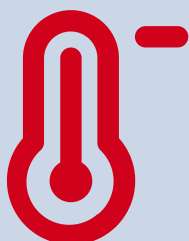
The figures refer to any session that took place with attendance and was recorded on the project's internal spreadsheets; the number of sessions recorded here is slightly fewer than were found on SystmOne, with a total of 408.

Forest School sessions took place in a wide range of weather conditions, with rainy weather including 14 sessions in *heavy rain*, and four sessions in *snow*. The majority of sessions took place in sunshine or cloud.

Responses from satisfaction surveys indicate that very few parents reported concerns about the weather, although it is likely that more parents were put off by bad weather and either withdrew their child or did not bring them on particularly cold or wet days.



The majority of sessions (204) took place in temperatures between 11-20, which are perfectly comfortable for outdoor activity, with the next most common range being 1-10. A few sessions took place in warmer or colder temperatures, but none took place at temperatures exceeding 30, which may have been hazardous to adults and particularly children.



## Implementation Evaluation

### *How many staff and carers completed Forest Schools training?*

Forest Schools offered Level 1 and Level 3 training to early years staff and parents with the goal of increasing the use of outdoor spaces in a long term sustainable way. The hope was that staff would continue to deliver Forest School type sessions after the end of the course run by the project and parents and others would feel confident in engaging children in outdoor play and learning.

In Contract 2 the project anticipated 20 early years staff and 10 parents at Level 1 per year, and a total of 10 early years staff and parents per year at Level 3.

At both levels the majority of completers of the course were early years staff.

The Level 3 training for the final year of the project will conclude in December 2023 and so figures have only been compared for the Level 3 training in Y4-5.

#### Level 1 Early Years Staff



#### Level 3 Early Years Staff and parents



### *What was the outcome of setting assessments?*

Forest Schools assessed and where relevant supported improvements to the outdoor spaces and access at nurseries and elsewhere where they took children. This process involved an initial assessment and discussion with the setting about their needs. The project used funding to improve spaces or provide training equipment to support the use of spaces. They also referred to Better Place to support the improvement of play areas. This was all during contract 2 as the same funding structure was not available in contract 1.



23

Settings had an assessment

Of the 23 settings assessed 19 opted to have equipment to improve their ability to play outdoors. Typically the settings first required wellies and waterproofs, as well as some money for transport, to enable children to participate safely in the sessions.

Although not clear in the data, discussion with the project staff suggests that almost all settings initially equipped the children with appropriate clothing and if they took part in Forest Schools a second or subsequent time they used available funds to then add naturalistic play equipment or specific resources such as fire-pits that staff could use themselves to deliver sessions. This very much depended on how engaged and enthusiastic the setting was.



# Evaluation Findings

## Satisfaction



The project consistently achieved good response rates to satisfaction surveys, with 244 responses over the course of the project. This equates to around a 65% response rate and gives a good level of reliability to the results. The comments received also provide some low level evidence of impact, with parents reporting changes in their children, which they attribute to attending Forest School sessions.

**100%** of respondents had a median score of 4 or more

**100%** of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the project was helpful to them

**99%** of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they were satisfied with the support they received

**99%** of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the project gave them useful information

**97%** of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the project was easy to access

**100%** of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they would recommend the project to family or friends

**100%** of respondents were happy with the project overall

*My child thoroughly enjoyed all the activities provided by Forest School. This experience has helped my child develop understanding of nature this has helped her to enjoy spending more time outdoors. (2019)*

*He was always very excited on Thursday knowing he was going to Forest School. He has come out of his shell a lot more and a lot more vocal. When he saw the fire and enjoyed the marshmallows was his favourite activity. (2023)*

*Forest School project has helped my child. He is more confident in school. He also has developed a love for insects as before he would be scared to touch them. (2020)*

*This 10 week activity has been amazing course to be part of. I feel my child has really opened up and now likes to explore trees, grass, spiders. I have also enjoyed coming along with my child. (2020)*

*Very helpful to build confidence in children. Allows them to be familiar with different weather conditions. Great opportunity to explore nature whilst also having fun. (2022)*

# Evaluation Findings

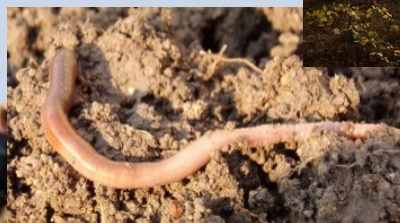
## Conclusions

The first year of evaluation during the first contract of the Forest Schools Play project offered insight into the key components of the project for 3 year olds and potential benefits of Forest Schools for this age group. This led to the development of a comprehensive logic model with plausible child level outcomes.

Over the six years of delivery, the project has provided good evidence that they are able to deliver Forest Schools Play in nursery settings within the Better Start Bradford area in line with the logic model. They have achieved close to anticipated numbers in key metrics across the entire period. In the last two years the project has met or exceeded targets. The project has consistently had 100% positive satisfaction rates.

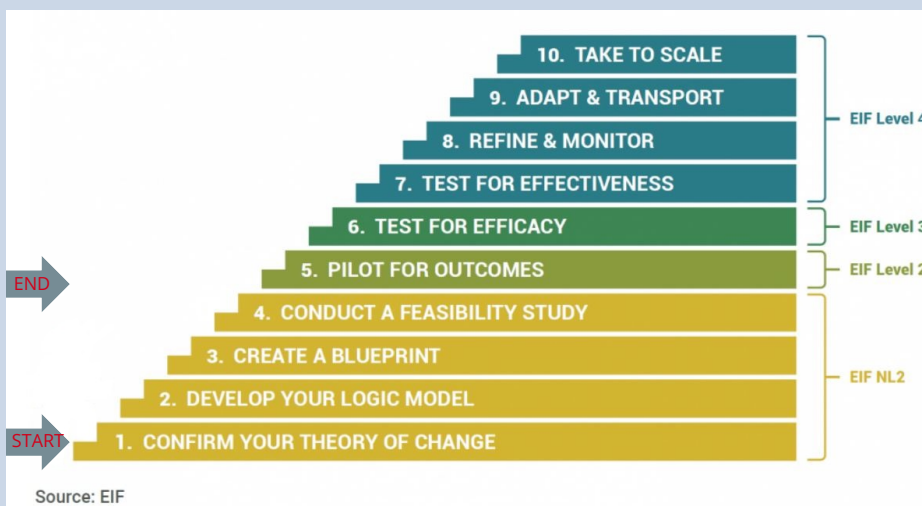
Nursery closures in response to COVID-19 significantly impacted the project, however the team showed great adaptability and continued to deliver at times when this was permitted. The project's recovery following COVID-19 was rapid and consistent, despite ongoing challenges.

Given that the project had demonstrated the logic model inputs, outputs and activities in action, and that plausible child outcomes have been identified, there is potential for further evaluation which focuses on the social and emotional outcomes for children, and secondary outcomes related to language and physical activity.



# Evidence for Forest Schools

## Evidence rating



This project started at step 1 of the EIF rating of evidence based interventions as there was no existing model for this kind of Forest Schools provision for under fours.

The Innovation Hub would now rate the project as ready for steps 5 and 6 and moving into the EIF Level 2 rating. The ethnographic study provides some initial evidence for outcomes and given that the project has evidenced their ability to deliver to the logic model further research seems valuable.

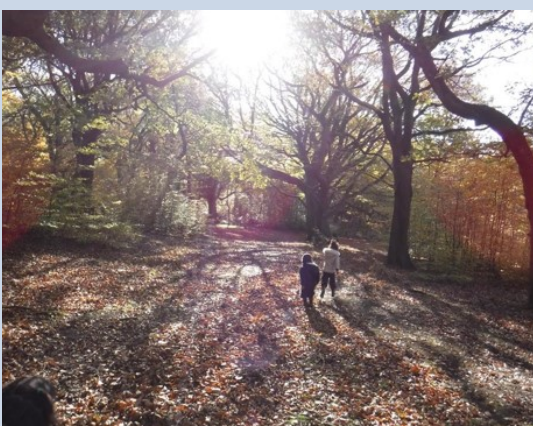
## Evidence review



In 2017 BSBIH conducted a rapid evidence of Forest Schools for 0-3 and concluded that there was insufficient evidence of impact for this age range, but that evidence in older age ranges provided a basis for piloting Forest Schools principles and activities with 3 year-olds.

This project has provided evidence that a model of its kind is feasible, that there is evidence of positive outcomes, as shown by the ethnographic study initiated in 2019 and written up by BSBIH in 2022 and therefore this could now be progressed to further pilots for outcomes and a test of efficacy.

Evidence from elsewhere related to this specific age range remains sparse, although a few studies looking at 3-5 year-olds have shown evidence of positive effects on social and emotional responses over the short term. These studies do not typically explore the impact of Forest Schools in poorer and more deprived, or ethnically diverse areas such as the BSB area and so the Forest Schools project in BSB remains an outlier and provides an opportunity for a unique exploration of Forest Schools provision and impacts.

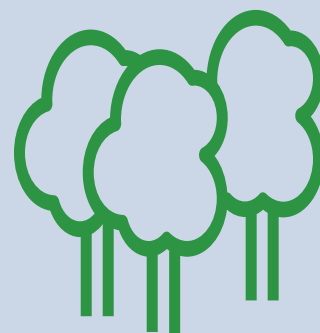




# Recommendations

## Recommendations for Practice

With the fidelity of delivery and positive responses from parents and early years staff the main recommendation for delivery is that this project is of high quality and that any bodies seeking to support early years provision could well invest in this project with its current model of delivery. We encourage the project to use the findings from this report and their own feedback from work with the schools and nurseries to support any bids for funding that would allow this project to continue and for BSB to support that process at every given opportunity.



The goal of sustainability through the training provision should continue to be pursued, with a particular focus on gaining the buy-in of school and nursery leadership team. This should increase the number of trained staff who are able to implement their learning from Level 1 and Level 3 training within their settings and develop a culture of outdoor play within the area. This process may be supported through evidence from this evaluation, particularly the qualitative work, from the most engaged settings so far, and from wider evidence of the value of forest schools (mostly at older ages) within the existing literature.

## Recommendations for Evaluation



As the involvement of Better Start Bradford ceases, **the project should continue to evaluate their delivery in whatever form that takes** particularly the key metrics of sessions or courses delivered, children completing and training provided, alongside demographic data of participants. **Ideally the model for delivery and evaluation developed with Better Start Bradford would be replicated in future as there is already evidence for the fidelity of this structure.**

The project currently has a confirmed logic model and has shown that they are able to deliver with fidelity. This means that if delivery were able to continue in the current model the project may be in a position to progress to a higher level evaluation of efficacy and/or effectiveness. The focus of this evaluation should be on the social and emotional outcomes for participating children, with consideration of the possible impacts on language development and physical activity. However, more work is needed to establish and confirm appropriate measures and how these could be collected.