

**1) In what capacity are you responding? Please briefly explain the nature of your organisation/role (for example, parent, teacher, business leader).**

The Northern Ireland Forest School Association (NIFSA) is an independent charity established in 2008 to promote and support outdoor learning in schools across Northern Ireland. It is recognised as one of the lead players in delivering outdoor learning in schools. To date NIFSA have trained and accredited over 700 teachers in through its own nationally recognised Forest School Leader Level 3 qualification. This has resulted in nearly a third of the NI schools' estate gaining official Forest School status (Over 250 schools, mainly Primary and Nursery). The NIFSA website [www.forestschooolsni.com](http://www.forestschooolsni.com) reaches over 7,500 members.

The benefits of taking learning outside are well documented: increased physical and mental health, improved fine motor skills, improved confidence and self-esteem, greater resilience and team working skills and much more.

NIFSA believes that teachers should be encouraged to take their lessons outside at every opportunity and this should be reflected throughout the curriculum.

**2) What are your views on the strengths of the Northern Ireland Curriculum?**

NIFSA recognise the strong emphasis on outdoor learning and play in Preschool and Foundation Stage, as explained in the guidance '*Learning through Play*' (CEA 2022) and '*Learning Outdoors in Preschool and Foundation Stage*' (CEA 2022).

In the introduction section of the NI National Curriculum – Primary (CEA 2007), we recognise that within the section titled '*1.5 The Whole Curriculum Aims and Objectives*' there are some links to mental and physical wellbeing, environment and sustainability.

It is clear that the statutory requirements for 'The World around Us' reflect the possibility of using the outdoors. The statutory requirements across the four strands of learning clearly demonstrated many possibilities to use outdoors. However, it should be noted that these are not explicit.

**3) What are your views on the weaknesses of the Northern Ireland Curriculum?**

There is no mention of 'outdoor learning' within the main NI National Curriculum. NIFSA believes that if children are to become stewards of the environment, they must first feel a connection to it, have positive learning experiences around it and recognise how we rely on the environment for our own wellbeing.

The National Curriculum needs to explicitly say that using the outdoors for learning should be viewed as best practice and demonstrated across all key stages by giving support, guidance and examples of how each area of learning can link to outdoor learning.

For example, NIFSA suggest that outdoor learning and play could be strongly linked to the areas of learning and to the main objectives for the National Curriculum (see National Curriculum, section 1.6)

An example of one of the main objectives is '*Thinking Skills and Personal Capabilities*' as described in section 1.6 of the NI National Curriculum. These objectives could easily be met by taking part in play based, investigative outdoor projects., yet nothing relating to outdoor learning is mentioned. Through outdoor learning projects, older primary children will have the opportunity to develop new concepts through practical methods.

For example, please consider how a single forest school activity based around making pictures of trees in small groups can contribute to cross-curricular learning. The session can cover many areas of the primary curriculum at once. Instead of sitting at a desk inside, the children are outside, working together, communicating and listening, talking about the parts of the tree, making decisions, dealing with differences of opinion. They also improve their gross motor skills as they must move across uneven

ground, bend or squat to gather, reach and use fine manipulative movements to pick up and place resources.

As the children build their picture, the wind may move things or bits may roll so they have to problem solve. They need to consider if they must move their artwork or if they can find something to weigh down the light leaves. There is also an opportunity to connect with nature and use their senses to enrich their learning. To finish, the groups can show their pictures to the other groups using their oral language skills and description skills when discussing their picture. They listen to other groups and find positive aspects of other groups work. The children can evaluate their teamwork and think how they would do things differently. Different age groups can do the activity as young children could be learning about the trunk, leaves and older children could be learning about photosynthesis.

NIFSA suggests that this one activity demonstrates how outdoor learning links to several areas of learning, such as Languages and Literacy, Personal Development and Mutual Understanding, The Arts and The World Around Us. We suggest that the Northern Ireland Curriculum puts Forest School and outdoor learning in a much stronger focus throughout the whole curriculum, from Nursery to Post 16.

NIFSA also suggests that there is little expectation in the curriculum to use the outdoors for active learning and play. It could also be suggested that there is a lack of support and guidance for senior leadership teams on how to utilise the outdoors. Therefore, for some schools, using the outdoors is not a strong part of the school ethos and becomes 'a special treat' when it should be considered good teaching and learning practice.

#### **4) To what extent do you think the Northern Ireland Curriculum has been successfully implemented in schools, and what do you perceive to be the barriers (if any) to its implementation?**

NIFSA have observed many fantastic and very creative curriculum-based lessons being delivered outside. Teachers, once they have undertaken the NIFSA Forest School Level 3 qualification, are quick to adapt their own indoor lessons and bring them outside. By bringing them outside this adds a whole new dimension to the teaching and pupils are more engaged and energised to participate.

However, if outdoor sessions are to be promoted this must go hand in hand with overall support to teachers to remove the barriers that currently exist:

- a) A Northern Ireland Outdoor Learning Strategy needs to be developed. This should be a collaboration between all major stakeholders and agencies from the Public and voluntary sector. This will identify key players that could help remove those barriers
  - a. E.g. Production of outdoor learning curriculum-based resources. The CCEA could support this area.
  - b. Funding to provide outdoor clothing for the most disadvantaged schools. We would suggest that the Department of Education NI could take responsibility of this.
  - c. Training and CPD of school staff and those in teacher training to understand the benefits of outdoor learning and Forest School. This could come from NIFSA.

#### **5) Bearing in mind this is a review of the curriculum, and not of qualifications or assessment, is there anything else you would like to draw attention to that you think should be a focus of the review?**

The National Curriculum should be developed with the issues that are current at the time. Preparing pupils in not only academic subjects but ensuring they are resilient, creative, team players and all the other attributes that are requirements of a successful and caring society.

In only a couple of generations pupils have been massively disconnected with nature. This is a disaster waiting to happen. A recent report highlighted that the Climate Crisis is, yes devastating, but it is a result of our disconnect with nature. We need to actively get our pupils to re-engage with nature again. They are the custodians of the planet in future years.

NIFSA suggests that the Forest School approach and using the outdoors as a learning resource supports implementation of government documents such as '*The Children and Young People's Strategy 2020 - 2030*' and the Public Health Agency '*Take 5*' campaign.

Improvements to support outdoor learning could include:

- Interactive resources linked to the online edition of the National Curriculum, where teachers can select an area of learning and gain ideas and resources to support planning and preparation. For example, in Mathematics and Numeracy, links could be made to weight and size of found objects in nature, finding and measuring angles, measuring the circumference of trees, exploring area and volume. These types of activities will allow the children to connect with nature as they are learning mathematical skills and realise that their mathematical skills have real life applications so they will learn to understand and like the subject more.
- NIFSA recognises that school staff may need help with staff ratio, risk assessments and planning when considering the outdoors. Expectations around planning and paperwork will need to have guidance from the appropriate agencies.
- NIFSA suggest that inspectors and school senior management teams may need support to consider risk benefit play. NIFSA have spoken to teachers who faced unrealistic expectations from inspectors regarding outdoor materials. Comments were made by an inspector about removing any wood from the school outdoor area if staff did not source it from an approved supplier, as it would affect their insurance if a child was injured. This scares school staff, as they are not able to take advantage of free natural resources. Therefore, clarity and guidance need to be given from the CCEA or Dept. of Education.
- There should be a closer partnership between the EA maintenance team for school grounds and the school staff. It would be of great benefit to schools if maintenance teams were made more aware of wildlife/growing campaigns such as 'No Mow May', school vegetable gardens as well as tree nurseries and seed harvesting. NIFSA have learned of examples of the difficulties schools face when areas of funded tree whips are planted by classes and EA maintenance teams have mowed them.
- Active Uniforms – Some uniforms may restrict physical movement, especially for girls. Some uniforms may be a barrier to using the outdoors. NIFSA recommends that all children wear a uniform which is comfortable, allows for freedom of movement and keeps the children warm when outside.