



1. INTRODUCTION



This is our second biannual monitoring and impact report for the period September 2022 - February 2023. For details of our evaluation strategy, see *Evaluation flow chart*. Our delivery team continues to put their time and effort into implementing this strategy, with the support of the Lead Team.

This report will document the recommendations actioned since we last shared our progress in October 2022 and reflect on some of our key achievements in the last two quarters; we will 'Focus on' our Specialist forest school provision.

1.1. We would like to take this opportunity to say thank you to our funders and partners during this biannual period; these include:

- Rise
- The National Lottery Community Fund
- Shy Bairns
- The Rank Foundation
- Scholefield Trust
- Newcastle High Sheriff
- Northumberland High Sheriff
- Tyne and Wear Community Foundation
- Hospital of God
- Bentley Motors
- Reeds Grassroots
- Northumberland Community Chest
- Wellesley
- Comic Relief
- Groundworks
- Prudhoe Town Council
- The Coop
- Street Games
- Leading Links
- Durham Fun and Food



1.2 Actioned recommendations during Q3-Q4

Recommendations made in '*Impact and monitoring report for Q1-Q2: March - August 2022*' were partly actioned in Q3-Q4 (Sep 22 - Feb 23). See section 7.1, table A, for a detailed breakdown of the recommendations actioned this biannual period.

1.3 Notable areas of development this biannual period

North East Charity Awards nomination: Stomping Grounds North East forest school was shortlisted in the **Outstanding Social Enterprise** category at the North East Charity Awards. We attended the ceremony in October 2022 and, whilst we didn't win the award, it was such an honour to be shortlisted and to celebrate with other amazing social enterprises.

Time to Shine Leadership programme: Funding from the Rank Foundation, through their Time To Shine Leadership programme, gave us the opportunity to recruit our new Forest Coordinator. Eve began her role in January 2023. She has attended our youth provision here then progressed to become a Young Leader, so we were very pleased when she was successful in her application to the Time To Shine Leadership programme to become our very first Forest Coordinator.

Reframing Autism: We secured Comic Relief funding to deliver a year long programme to support families with neurodivergent children. Our project is unique in its approach, offering access to a qualified Play Therapist and Occupational Therapist, delivered by therapeutic forest school practitioners, supported by The Autistic Advocate. We are supporting families at various stages of their neurodivergence journeys to embrace their neurology and find their autistic identity.

Saltwell Park Outdoor Kindergarten: our Gibside Kindergarten staff and lead team secured access to a new site at Saltwell Park, Gateshead, and began discussing our new outdoor kindergarten venture.



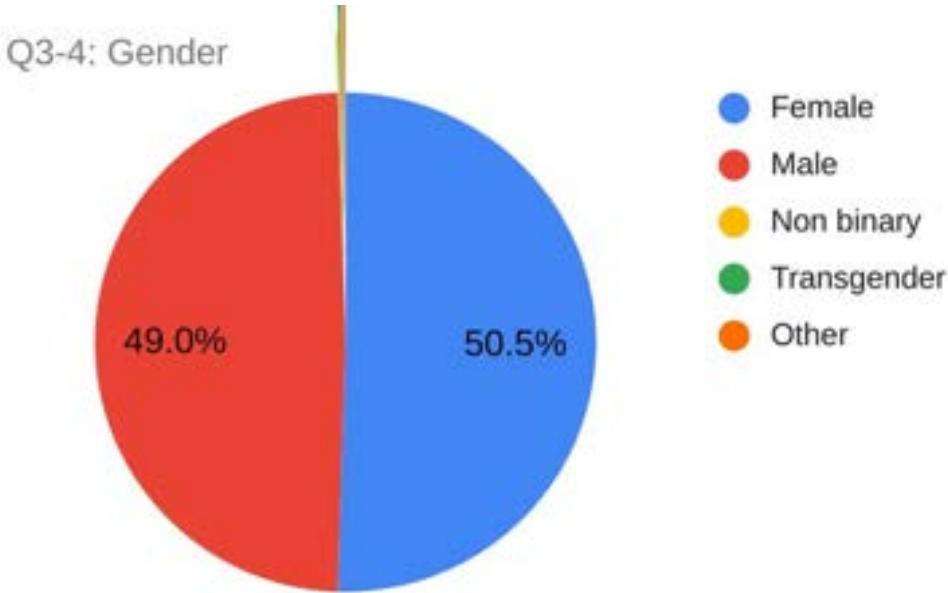
2. WHO IS ACCESSING OUR PROVISION?

During Q3-Q4 (Sep 22 - Feb 23), we delivered:

- **611** sessions of forest school
- At **11** sites across the region
- Reaching **1105** people

2.1. Gender

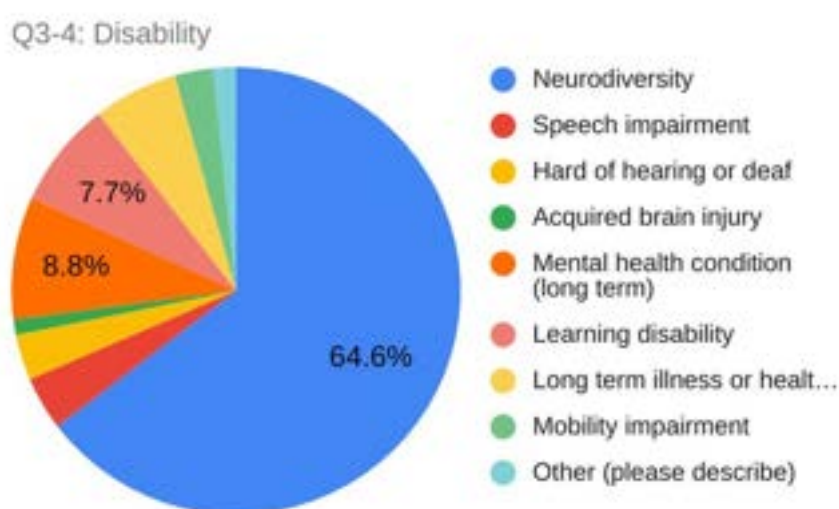
Of the 19 groups (**1105** participants) where data on gender was collected, there were **1105** responses to gender.





2.2. Disability

Of the total number of participants accessing our provision (1105), **615** participants recorded their disability data (56% of our total participants). Of this cohort, 29% (**181** responses) recorded a disability. Of those recording a disability:

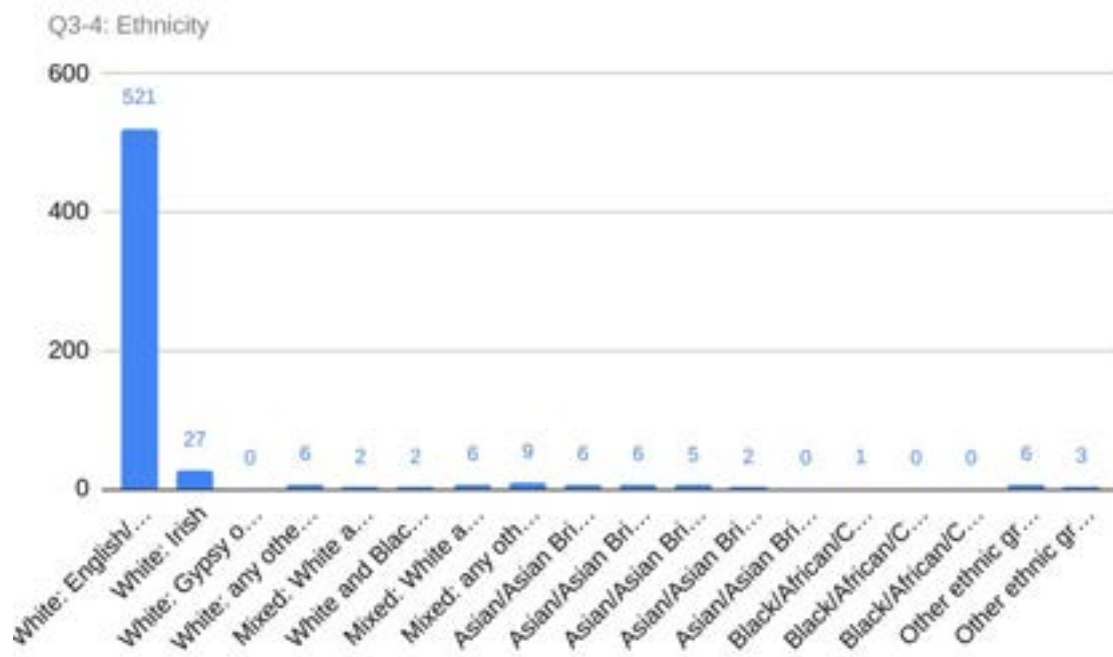


From our last biannual report to this period, there is **an increase in the proportion of participants reporting neurodiversity (57.5% to 64.6%)** and **an increase in the proportion of participants recording long term mental health conditions (4% to 8.8%)**. We anticipated in our last report that the introduction of new targeted provision for families with autistic children (Reframing Autism) this biannual period would impact our data. There is a great deal of research outlining comorbidities with autism, including the higher incidence of mental health conditions than the rest of the population. Stomping Grounds North East offers regular, good quality CPD opportunities to practitioners delivering our specialist provision to ensure we have the appropriate knowledge and skills to support participants who attend



2.3. Ethnicity

602 respondents recorded their ethnicity from a total of 1105 participants attending our provision. The majority (**86.5%**) of our forest school participants recording their ethnicity were White: English/Welsh/Scottish/Northern Irish/British. **13.5%** of our participants were from minoritised ethnic groups.



The representation of minoritised ethnic groups at our provision has remained largely unchanged since last biannual period (13.3% to 13.5%). It is important to highlight the population of minoritised ethnic groups in the North East is 6.4%, therefore representation of these groups within our provision is high (Regional ethnic diversity - GOV.UK Ethnicity facts and figures). Our continued forest school delivery in Benwell, Newcastle, along with Community Link Workers, and our commitment to supporting and training community members to deliver forest school within their locality, will support future participation of minoritised ethnic groups at our provision.



2.4. Positive Action

Our vision at Stomping Grounds is to encourage people from underrepresented groups to access rural spaces via our forest school provision. We set up a positive action programme to work towards this, ensuring our trading profits benefit the community directly by offering free and subsidised spaces to children and young people who are historically excluded from outdoor provision.

During this biannual period, we offered **18 positive action spaces** to children and young people, compared with 20 the previous biannual period - **a decrease of 2 spaces**. The increase in positive action spaces during Q1-2 related to our Gibside Family Festival, for which 10 spaces were allocated.

During Q3-4, we have offered an additional 2 positive actions spaces at Gibside Kindergarten (**from 7, to 9**) and additional 4 at our Under 5s provision (**from 0, to 4**).



3. FOCUS ON: SPECIALIST PROVISION

3.1 Our Bespoke Therapeutic Forest School offer

Our specialist provision comprises of 5 offers:

- Wellness groups
- 1:1 sessions
- Flexible schooling agreements (pupils attend our site on release from school)
- In school sessions (our practitioners deliver on school site)
- Family sessions

Much of our specialist provision is completely bespoke, reflecting the specific strengths and challenges each child/young person has. Our provision can support children and young people who:

- Cannot currently access school
- Are accessing school but would benefit from additional support
- Have been excluded or are close to exclusion
- Have complex neurological conditions
- Are in residential care, foster care or adopted.

Because of the individualised and bespoke nature of our support, we can work with children and young people with many different life experiences and challenges. We work flexibly with children, young people and their families to deliver initial sessions in spaces that are already known and safe for them, for example a local park or the family garden. In some cases, we will work indoors with young people when this could lead to a trusting relationship for outdoor engagement. The following infographic illustrates our process of engagement for specialist provision.





3.2. Our team of practitioners

The combined lived experiences of our staff team means we can meet young people where they are at, understand their strengths and challenges, and be role models for what is achievable with the right support. Members of our 1-1 delivery team share autism, ADHD, PTSD, dyslexia, school trauma and LGBTQIA+ identities with many of the young people we work with.

Our Bespoke Therapeutic Forest School practitioners are qualified Forest School practitioners, Therapeutic Forest Practitioners, with additional training in Intensive Wellbeing Support in the Outdoors. We are part of a wider network of organisations who share best practice and meet for supervision. We are recognised Forest School Association providers, one of only 2 in the North East, and are Ofsted registered.

Behind the scenes we have a team of consultants and advisors who help shape our service through regular supervision, observations, support with writing reports and sharing best practice. We draw on the expertise of a team of Educational Psychologists, Clinical Psychologists, Occupational Therapists, Play Therapists and Autistic Advocates to ensure our bespoke packages are high quality and high impact.



3.3. What do children/young people, families and professionals think about our provision?

The following case studies illustrate the journeys of 4 children and young people who have participated in our specialist provision offer in the last 12 months (and for some, they continue to attend). The names of each child/young person (CYP) have been changed to maintain their anonymity, including exclusion of details which might otherwise identify them within and beyond our forest school community.

Where possible, we have sought to gather the perspectives of our forest school participants (the children and young people themselves) and their family members. In some cases, parent/carers are sharing their children's experiences where those CYP are not able to contribute themselves. For the purpose of the following 4 case studies, we conducted interviews with:

- 2 parent/carers
- 2 young people.

The following cases will describe why they were referred to/self referred to our specialist provision, their experience of engaging with Stomping Grounds' staff team, the experience of CYP in our forest school settings, the impact of forest school upon the CYP mental health and wellbeing, and the wider impact of our offer.

In addition to the case studies presented, feedback shared with us by parents/carers on our day to day provision and from our participants during sessions is also included.



3.3.1. Case study 1: Callum and Eli

3.3.1.1. Callum's journey

Callum began his forest school journey with Stomping Grounds after his EHCP was finalised in early 2020, and our offer became part of his EOTAS (Education Other Than At School) package. Callum's profile includes: speech disorder, autism, anxiety, OCD, and auditory processing disorder. At the point at which we began to engage with Callum, his parent described him as:

“... very traumatised from his mainstream school experience, which had led to 3 months of isolation with daily restraint and eventually exclusion for violent behaviour towards staff. We were unsure how Callum would respond to SG given the fragility of his mental health at the time but initial conversations around how he could be supported felt really positive and appropriate.” (Parent A)

Flexible and responsive approach

This flexibility in our approach, creating fully bespoke packages to meet the child where they are, is key to our therapeutic forest school offer. For this young person, their provision was on a 1:1 basis in the first instance, at a site away from their peers, with the same parent attending with him each session. This offer reflected the needs of Callum at that time and was decided upon in discussion with his parents.



In conjunction with this, Parent A recognised the trauma informed approach of our practitioners as key to engaging with Callum in the woods:

“...the gentle, gradual and needs-based approach adopted by the practitioners was very important to avoid Callum feeling overwhelmed.”

Parent A wanted to highlight the value of ongoing communications between Stomping Grounds and themselves, which was particularly important when Callum was experiencing challenging situations at home and in the woods:

“What was so reassuring about these times was the clear and constructive communication between SG and us so that we could [thought shower] on how provision could be tweaked to support Callum at these times.”

They referred to examples where transition would be a difficult process for Callum so changes were made to arrival at the woods - the practitioner began to meet Callum at their car and walk to site with him and his parent. This “made all the difference”. Later in his journey, this transition was adjusted to include an activity he would begin with his practitioner and parent during their walk to site, which supported his engagement with the larger group when he arrived at site. Another adjustment occurred to support his transition out of a session:

“[His practitioner] arranged to have a lunch picnic with Callum after every session away from the main camp so that they could share all that had happened at the session with his Dad and allow Callum to decompress after the session.”



Fine tuning and complete changes to session delivery and content reflect the significance of regular communications between practitioners and parent/carers; these discussions ensure their forest school experience is truly bespoke and reflective of their needs.

Rebuilding trust and healing from school trauma

Over time, these adjustments, close observations and reflexive practice enable our practitioners to support participants to manage situations and interactions that might otherwise have caused anxiety. For Callum, building trust and making connections with others was vital to his mental health.

“[He] grew in so many ways at forest school. He formed wonderful, trusting relationships with so many SG practitioners. It’s hard to put into words how beneficial SG’s was for Callum’s mental health. Without it, he would have been incredibly isolated and without a sense of belonging amongst peers.”

Once Callum had developed a trusting relationship with his regular practitioner on a 1:1 basis, with the support of his parent on site, over time this was able to progress to engaging with his peers:

“SG also provided social opportunities for Callum with other children and young people. This was the only part of his week where he would have these opportunities so it was really important.” (Parent A)



As Callum began to spend time with the larger group of children/young people on site, Parent A recognised that peer interaction continued to be challenging for him, but the key difference to previous experiences was the consistency and constancy of his 1:1 practitioner:

“Practitioners were key to supporting Callum at these times. There were also the expected social complexities but these experiences have been very important to his overall development. Having 1-1 support was however crucial for Callum to be able to access these peer sessions.”

Parent A describes the impact of forest school for Callum as transformative:

“From our perspective, we feel that we saw a very gradual, gentle re-awakening of Callum’s authentic self (before all the school-related trauma). He is also extremely confident and comfortable in nature, and much more resilient as a person. We believe that what SG has given to Callum will support him through the rest of his life.”



3.3.1.2. Eli's journey

Eli began their journey at forest school with our outdoor kindergarten at Gibside. He is autistic with a PDA profile, and a speech impairment. Parent A knew our provision well at the point at which Eli tried Gibside Kindergarten as Callum had been attending forest school with us for a year.

“Eli responded very well to a no pressure approach, and to the whole family being able to visit the provision together before starting his first session. This strategy was suggested by the SG practitioner who I spoke with on the phone before Eli's first session. They also suggested that we arrive on site at a quiet time so that Eli wouldn't be overwhelmed by lots of activity. This was an important accommodation.”

Ultimately the kindergarten was not the offer that Eli needed so our team discussed alternative options with his parents; this resulted in a similar offer to that of Callum, where a 1:1 practitioner would work with Eli, with a parent present.

“I was able to stay with Eli during the sessions. Without this accommodation, SG (like school) would have been inaccessible to him.” (parent A)

Flexible and responsive approach

Regular communications and adjustments were also key here to creating a bespoke offer to best meet Eli's needs. Eli began with kindergarten, then attended one of Callum's twice weekly sessions with his parent; this eventually required adjustment in order to meet Callum and Eli's different strengths and challenges. Eli was then offered his own 1:1 practitioner as part of his EOTAS package.

“...we were reassured by SG practitioner's understanding of how to support autistic children with a demand avoidance profile and their willingness to work at the child's own pace. These are aspects of Eli's profile which had made mainstream school so inaccessible to him.” (Parent A)



Eli's PDA profile required his practitioner to offer full flexibility and novelty in their offer, with the most significant adjustments needed in response to his anxiety due to demand avoidance.

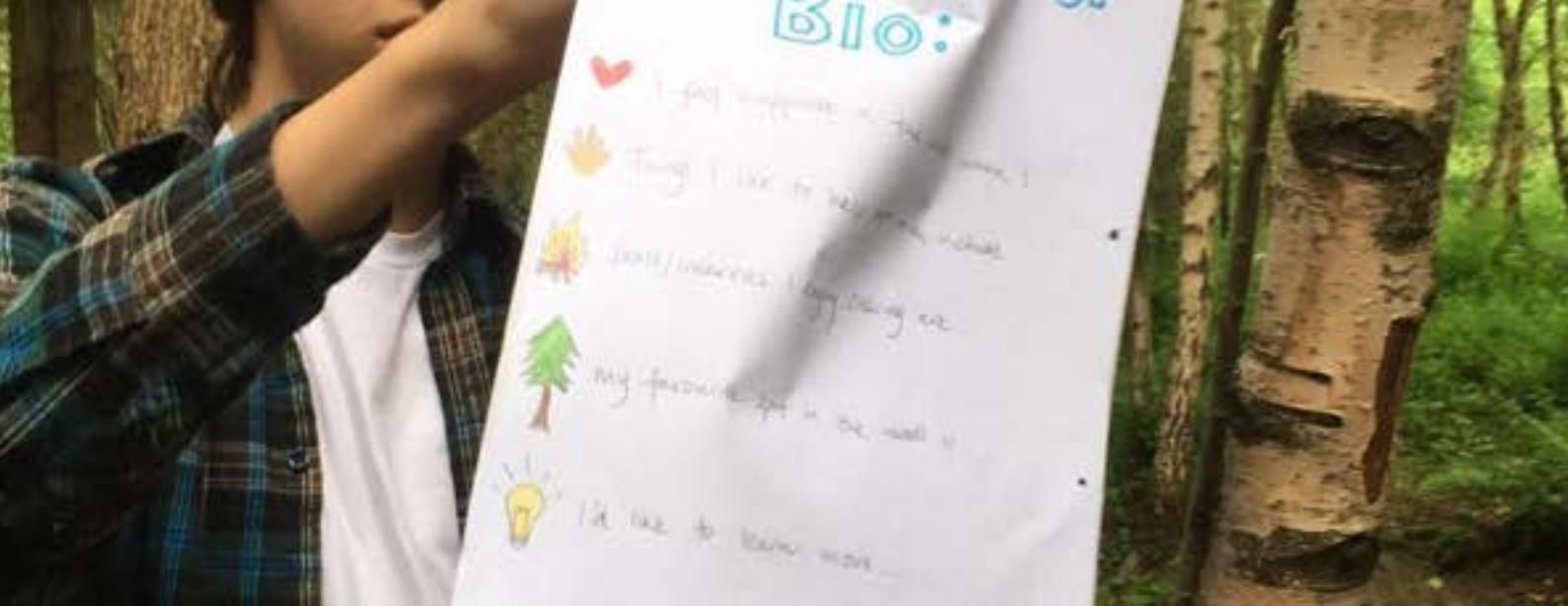
For Eli, this meant home visits to decrease anxiety around transitions; usually this would lead to forest school sessions at the family's allotment in close vicinity.

“...what stood out for me was how understanding the practitioners were with Eli and how willing they were to work at his own pace. They always gave him space and approached sensitively. This meant that he was able to slowly build trusting relationships.” (Parent A)

Building trust in others and feeling safe

Offering forest school at a place and pace that suited Eli's needs, with a practitioner attuned to PDA, resulted in some key areas of development for him:

“Eli formed an amazing relationship with his 1-1 practitioner to the extent that he could spend short periods of time alone with her (i.e. without me present). Even though these were time limited (10-15 minutes max), this was incredible progress for Eli and it was so important for him starting to trust the world beyond the boundaries of his family. There were obvious benefits to this for Eli's emotional health and wellbeing.” (Parent A)



For this family, our therapeutic forest school provision offered an opportunity to rebuild trust in others, reconnect with peers, build self-esteem and develop resilience. Parent A was asked how they would describe our offer to other families with neurodivergent children; they said:

“...it would be completely safe for the child. The parents would soon learn that they would never need to worry about their child, as their child’s bespoke needs will be met. Then (from our experience), once the child is in a comfortable place and has gained confidence, their sense of adventure and creativity will flourish. This also happens rapidly. Again, we’d emphasise that it’s a safe space for their child. Everyone is extremely attentive [...] [It is] a haven of understanding and compassion for autistic children and young people.”



3.3.2. Case study 2: Anna

Anna's journey

Anna is a Looked After Child (LAC) and began her forest school journey with Stomping Grounds as a participant at Saturday Club before the Covid pandemic; at this point, Anna was attending her local school with no issue and accessing forest school as part of group of 12 children each session. Following her family's relocation to another part of the region during the pandemic, Anna started at a new middle school in Year 7; due to the pandemic, there was no induction for Anna and her parent describes this as

“a terrible time, it quickly unravelled, and she didn't feel safe there” (Parent B).

Anna responded to this lack of safety through high risk behaviours, which became increasingly unsafe. The family felt unsupported by the school she was attending:

“School just descended into terrible endless confrontation, endlessly running away. The school then started to exclude her for fixed periods [...] We wrote really pleading letters to the Chair of Governors, ‘you need to understand the evidence base around Looked After children and exclusion, and mental health difficulties, and crime’. They didn't even reply. In the end we took her out of that school.” (Parent B)



Anna describes some of the activities she participated in when life at school became intolerable:

“We’ll go out and I’ll tell my Mum I’ll be back at something like 7, but then like I’ll just stay out – I won’t mean to, I’ll just stay out because I’m having fun and then I won’t get back until like 2 in the morning and she’ll be quite annoyed. Nearly every day, for 6 weeks. I’ll be sleeping over at other people’s houses and that. I loved it, I was having a great time, a really great time, but my parents probably weren’t. We were out on bikes at 12 o’clock at night, just doing wheelies in the road because there was no cars or anything. We were going in shopping trolleys and going in the skate park and that.” (Anna)

Anna’s parents sought help via their GP, who queried ADHD and made an urgent referral to CYPS (Children and Young People’s Service). Anna was home educated for a while, using an online school to access education. Whilst waiting for an assessment appointment via CYPS, a local organisation, Adopt North East, funded an ADHD assessment for Anna. Eventually another school offered Anna a place; she describes some of her experience here:

“It’s just the teachers that were really getting on my nerves [...] I would ask if I could go and stand outside the room or something, if I’m like talking too much, and they would always say no.” (Anna)

Unfortunately this school was unable to meet Anna’s needs:

“She went there, but it was even worse, despite their best efforts. She was completely overwhelmed and was excluded permanently within 6 weeks. Life completely shattered.” (Parent B)



This permanent exclusion was the trigger for “a full mental health breakdown”, exacerbating her previous risky behaviour whereby

“she put her life at risk lots of times, [with] loads of interactions with the police.” (Parent B).

At this time Anna met some young people in her area who shared similarly vulnerable and complex needs, and who Anna believed were her friends. Within this group she experienced being groomed by older young people to steal on demand.

When her parents tried to protect Anna from this group, she would push back:

...she kept trying to escape [...] we were trying to keep her safe but all the time she was breaking through locks, breaking through windows. All she wanted to do was escape the whole time to get back to these kids.” (Parent B)

When Anna did decide to cut ties with them, “...they beat her up, escalating violence; the last one was really dangerous.” (Parent B).

Around this time in summer of 2022, Anna finally received her ADHD diagnosis. Her family were extremely reluctant to pursue any further school places that were offered, choosing instead to highlight to the Local Authority (LA) that Anna's previous connection with Stomping Grounds Forest School was one she recognised as

“a place of safety; she was flourishing there” (Parent B).



They also engaged another local youth organisation with which the LA had a connection. Anna's parents began to create a bespoke EOTAS package for her in response to her vulnerability and neurodivergent profile.

Flexible and responsive approach

Stomping Grounds met the requirements and needs of Anna and her family by responding with flexibility and empathy when Anna was unable to engage with the first forest school practitioner offered.

“[She] just wouldn't even get out the car, she would not engage in any way. We had to abandon the whole thing. We went back to Sophie and said is there any chance we could have [Saturday Club practitioner] – she knows him, likes him, respects him.”
(Parent B)

This practitioner was available to work with Anna. Careful consideration was given to how initial sessions would respond to Anna's mental ill health at that time, so our practitioner delivered forest school in her back garden. Building trust was a slow, steady process, supported by the safe space of her garden and her sibling's presence.

“At first she wouldn't engage, wouldn't look at him. Her sibling was there, so he did the session with [practitioner], with Anna hovering and looking round. Week by week she engaged more.”



Anna explains that her expectation of what forest school was and how it would work in her garden did impact her willingness to engage in the early sessions:

“...the first time that you came to my house - because we were doing it like that - I did not like it at all. Because, like, I wasn’t used to doing any education at all, and suddenly you’ve come to my house and like... I thought I was going to be doing the same lessons but outside. [...] It wasn’t like that. I liked it more, I enjoyed it more, then got to know you more - and it was actually way better.” (Anna)

The flexibility to offer forest school off site, in her own home where she felt safe, was key to engaging Anna in our provision:

“...we couldn’t have had her up at the woods at that point [...] The garden was a neutral, peaceful space that [practitioner] could then appropriate and make something beautiful and peaceful for her there.” (Parent B)

Anna and her practitioner enjoyed forest school in her garden until the point when Anna said

“I’m ready to go up to the woods now” (Parent B);

Anna was in control of her forest school journey and Stomping Grounds was fully led by her readiness to and level of engagement. As such, her journey began in her garden, then moved to our main site in Prudhoe with her 1:1 practitioner, and now she also attends a large group session with her 1:1 practitioner.



Connecting with their practitioner

Parent B describes Anna's connection with her 1:1 practitioner as key to her engaging with forest school:

“He’s so wise and he’s so patient. He just gave her the space and he was incredible. I don’t think anyone else could have managed that. An academic tutor couldn’t have managed that at that point.” (Parent B)

This matching process by our Lead Team for each young person with their practitioner is hugely important to developing trust and connection, as a safe base from which a young person can heal, learn and thrive. For this particular pairing, our practitioner's practical skills and abilities, in addition to his cultivating a safe space through our forest school ethos, were significant to Anna's progress as they reflected her own interests and skills:

“(Practitioner) and his particular skills, and his understanding of her is a huge factor. It’s really lucky that she’s really good at it. From really early on he was getting her to do advanced (wood)work, and she was bringing home these incredibly delicate spoons that she’d carved – mushrooms, really fine things that she’d made. One big thing, she’s always been really good at cooking, even as a little kid, so he got her cooking on the campfire early on.” (Parent B)



This trusting connection developed over time, enabling our practitioner to offer a bridge between the safety of forest school and the new academic tutors from a local youth organisation who Anna would meet to study core school subjects. This route to connecting with new adults was suggested by Adopt North East and worked well for Anna:

He would have the fire set up in the garden and then the tutor would arrive, and join them both by the fire. As soon as she knew [Practitioner] thought it was okay, then she would accept each tutor. They carried that pattern on, so then she accepted her Science and Maths tutor, and then she introduced her English tutor, and then the History and RE tutor. That's how it worked.” (Parent B)

Parent B described the value and importance of Anna connecting with another trusted adult, that it supported them through an isolating experience with their child and offered an alternative perspective than that they had been hearing:

“Just for her to be able to engage with another adult, you start getting the wisdom of another pair of eyes. [...] The [last] Deputy Head said she was the worst case he'd ever in his whole career dealt with - to hear that as a parent is really, really tough. For someone like [Practitioner] to say 'she has huge intelligence in her hands', I can't tell you; it means so much.”



Developing skills, self-esteem and resilience

Now Anna too can appreciate some of her skills development and personal qualities; with increased self esteem and developing resilience, she described herself as “very good with my hands. And I’m very strong.” (Anna). She can also reflect on her own emotions, including pride, perseverance, sensory needs and frustration.

“I felt really happy when we’d finish something. Like that spoon that we did. We’d worked quite a long time on doing it. But like it also really annoyed me when we were trying to do those, weaving those fences, and it was all slimy and wet and I just wanted to go home.” (Anna)

This self-reflection is likely to also support her continued attendance at forest school; here Anna comments on her mood and how forest school can impact it:

“If I’m grumpy when I come to a session, most likely I won’t be at the end of it. But like, if I’m happy, I’ll stay happy.” (Anna)

There are ongoing challenges that Anna and her family negotiate in accessing our provision. Whilst Anna “always wants to go to the sessions”, her parents describe managing “a tightrope - we want her to go, we don’t want her to get so cold up there that she gets ill, but it’s more important to get her there. We have to do a bit of a dance around that!”. Anna shares her own views on this, explaining that she balances the impact of the weather with how she looks:

“I hated it when it was icy! I hated being cold. I’ve got cold feet now. And I’d get in a really bad mood when it was cold. But if you’re like a normal person, you’ll put warm clothes on, but I’m not. I don’t do that. I’ll go for fashion over warmth.” (Anna)



Stomping Grounds as a last resort

As similarly described by Parent A previously, our forest school provision felt like the last resort for Anna and her family. Parent B suggests this is due to “the failure of so many statutory services. This is the impact of Covid and austerity.” They describe our provision as “life saving”:

“You are the point of last resort and it’s just absolutely transformational what you do. You’re the only people who are literally able to step outside of it and be in the forest, and relate to these kids as human beings.” (Parent B)

Anna shares a similar description of what we offer at forest school, saying it is

“...somewhere where you can go and relax where people won’t judge you, and like, you can go and make some friends and have a nice time.” She believes forest school is good for “People that don’t really fit into the school system. Or like, people that just want a little break from mainstream school.”

Parent B highlights a package of support, which includes forest school, as all being vital to supporting Anna to recover and thrive within her EOTAS.

**“There’s almost like a triad and I think each part has played an equal role. The drug she takes [for ADHD] is the non-stimulant one. It’s got an antidepressant in it, so it brings them level all the way through and builds up over time. There’s [Practitioner] in forest school. Then there’s the Tutor team and a Youth Worker. I think the 3 of them have worked together really well. Essentially it’s brought her back to sanity, from a place of madness, what she was like in the summer.”
(Parent B)**



Communications within this package of support, amongst professionals and parents, were vital to shaping a responsive education for Anna. This was further supported by our Operations Manager who brought their expertise as an ex Social Worker to guide our input when Anna became a Child In Need with Social Services.

Continuing to access provision

Parent B is concerned about ensuring continuation of this educational package that is currently working well for Anna. Whilst Anna would like the “normal experience of being in a school, she knows that a school could make her ill again” (Parent B). They are seeking a flexible schooling arrangement with a local secondary school whereby Anna could attend some education in school and then attend forest school with her practitioner.

“Stomping Grounds has made a huge impact in making her well again, so we want it to continue. We desperately want it to continue [...] Somehow we’ve got to find a school that will work in partnership with you. [...] Anything that you can do to broker some longstanding partnerships with schools, a school, that could come into a flexible arrangement. That would be great for us.” (Parent B)



3.4. Case study 3:Eve

Eve's journey

Eve began her forest school journey with Stomping Grounds as a participant in our RISE youth group aged 17. She then became a Young Leader with us aged 18, supporting our holiday club provision, and more recently she was successful in gaining a position as our Forest Coordinator, funded by The Rank Foundation through their Time To Shine award. Now aged 20, as a young autistic adult, Eve has joined a neuro-affirming organisation and a staff team with a high proportion of neurodivergence.

Eve was encouraged to join our forest school by her parents following their move back to England:

“I was basically at home and kind of tidying, and being by myself with not much going on. My Mum was like it would be good for you to see other young people. We looked online and found Stomping Grounds, because we wanted something that was close by.”

Eve was nervous about starting at a new group, particularly as she felt participants in the group were “close knit and seemed like a really good group dynamic”. She recognised the Lead Practitioner at the youth group in supporting her through this.

“...the Leads were helping me [...] The first time I ever came, I had a panic attack. We were playing games and I hadn't really played games before like that, group games, but then after a while I found it really fun.”



When participants are booked onto our provision, they share relevant information about themselves which can help our team of practitioners to understand what they might need, prepare for situations which might trigger the child/young person and scaffold sessions to acknowledge both their challenges and strengths. Eve describes how she was supported through her panic attack:

“If you’re someone like me, who found groups a bit difficult... it was a bit overwhelming at first [...]. [Practitioner] asked what I needed, and we took a break, had a wander. She asked if I wanted her to stay or have time alone. That was really nice, knowing that, it made it comfortable for me. [...] they always want to make it better for you. I’ve had a really good experience with that. When I’ve needed breaks and stuff, I’ve been able to say and have space for myself.”

Accessibility and support in nature

Freedom of choice and participant-led sessions were important to Eve's experience at forest school; she appreciated being recognised as an individual, rather than assuming all young people will want the same experience.

“It’s different to a youth club in many ways – it’s a much more individual thing. You as a person rather than ‘these are young people that want to do this’ and will then make them do this or that. You have your own freedom and practitioners help with that. [...] At the end of every session, the Lead will be like what would you like to do next session, what would you like to eat .”



Eve compared being outdoors at forest school youth group with her experience of a youth group indoors. While she liked her time there, she suggests her sensory profile meant that she became overwhelmed, with the chaos and noise making it difficult to connect with others

“I used to go to a youth club after school – it was nice but it was really chaotic because it was indoors. I just remember it was always noisy and it just felt like... there wasn’t that connection between me and the people that worked there.”

She does, however, feel that connection with our practitioners, commenting that they “get to know you on a deeper level”; our forest school ethos means if problems arise

“we’re always encouraged to talk about it and tell them how we feel.”

“The whole thing about FS is making everyone feel comfortable. It makes it a better experience if you have someone who understands you better. I felt like the Leads were really good at making me feel welcome.”

Ultimately, for Eve, it is being outdoors in nature that offers such huge value to forest school - from skills development to connecting with peers, being outdoors in nature is key:

“I’d say to those who are wanting to learn new skills and make new friends, I think that being out in the forest has such a different feel to being indoors. You feel much more relaxed and you get to connect with nature a lot more. Especially for young people who are indoors at school a lot and don’t have time outdoors, I think that you can learn a lot about nature and learn a lot about yourself. There’s something for everyone I think. You can do creative arts and crafts; you can play a game; you can learn to whittle. You don’t have to be stuck doing one thing; there’s a lot of freedom in what you’d like to do. It’s your time to be happy in nature.”



Exploring disabled identity, acknowledging strengths and challenges, developing resilience

Eve joined our Young Leader programme, undertook training to understand how the role of Young Leader would contribute to a forest school holiday club, and began volunteering at holiday clubs at Dukes Hagg. Throughout this time, Eve was beginning to explore how her autistic profile presented at forest school, which aspects contributed to her role as Young Leader and which arose as challenges to it; here she retrospectively reflects on her initial sessions as a Young Leader, considering what she found difficult and what would have supported her:

“I think I’ve grown a lot since then so I can take more, but when I first started it was a little bit difficult ... I remember at holiday club it was stressful because I was helping with crafts and it was really busy. It was like, I enjoyed it, but it was almost like I think I could have done with a bit of extra support at the time. Probably not so much now. If you’re someone that’s new, and especially if they might have something like autism, like me... for example, like (another young person) having her 1:1 practitioner with her when she’s doing Young Leader stuff, that would have helped me at the time.”

The type and level of support tailored to Eve at RISE, along with her drive to succeed, is what enabled her to access forest school and thrive there:

“Because of the support I’ve gotten from Stomping Grounds, it’s helped me continue. If I hadn’t have got the same amount of support then it would have been harder. If I was told ‘just do this, do that’ and ‘we’ll not meet your individual needs’, then it would have been a lot more stressful. It’s both me wanting to push myself and grow, but then it’s also the Leads (practitioners) that have helped me do that because without that extra support I probably wouldn’t have continued.”



Recognising Eve's needs and our responsibility to implement appropriate support was key to her progress into employment at Stomping Grounds. Eve began as a participant, became a Young Leader, and then secured her 'Time to Shine' Forest Coordinator role. Throughout her journey, Stomping Grounds has ensured Eve has access to a trusted staff member; for the most part this has been two staff who know Eve very well. They have enabled her to recognise her specific needs, acknowledge and respect her own boundaries, build resilience and develop her autistic identity.

“When I was volunteering as Young Leader, this was probably on me anyway, but I think I was sometimes doing a bit too many days. I did a 4 day week. I think that I said yes to as many as I could, but I’ve learned now that I need to have enough energy.”

Understanding her own disability with support from our staff team has enabled Eve to connect with herself, children and young people, and practitioners at forest school in a new way.

“As a practitioner, you’re always learning – not just the kids, but you yourself are always learning. Since I’ve started employment, I’ve learned so much about how you deal with certain situations... the most interesting part is learning about the minds of children, how they think and how they feel. Almost like how their brains develop differently in nature, rather than in a normal school setting.”



Eve highlighted the reciprocal, non-hierarchical nature of learning at forest school, whether as a participant or practitioner, and how valuable it has been within her journey at Stomping Grounds:

“[Practitioner] was telling me you can learn stuff from all different ages, even if someone is 16 and you’re 19, you can still learn a lot from different kinds of people. A lot of the people I work with are older than me and I’m learning a lot from them, and I hope that you can learn from me as well.”

One aspect of this learning journey for Eve has been around her identity as an Autistic young person. Stomping Grounds is an organisation where 17% of staff members are disabled and 10% are neurodivergent; we offer a safe, supportive space in which our participants and staff can explore their own disabled identities, have access to appropriate accommodations and feel valued in what they offer to our provision. Initially describing herself as a person with Autism, Eve now uses identity first language and hopes to inspire other young people to embrace their neurodivergence:

“Autistic people can get jobs and they can function in society; if they have the right support, they can succeed [...] I hope to inspire other young autistic people that they, too, can find employment, and contribute to society. I am hoping to enjoy a long career in the forest.”



3.5. Additional feedback from parent/carers and professionals

There were some parent/carers and partners who could not contribute to our case studies, but were eager to share their experience of specialist provision at Stomping Grounds.

3.5.1. Parent C

Here is a short impact statement shared by Parent C, describing the ways in which our specialist forest school offer has provided a safe space with skilled practitioners as part of a wider EOTAS package.

“Stomping Grounds has had an amazing impact on my neurodivergent child, attending 1:1 sessions as part of his EOTAS package. When they began, I had little hope they would even attend: out of education for 2 years, struggled to leave their room, complex issues, PDA, OCD, sensory issues, anxiety and situational mutism. It is testament to the skill, care and understanding of his practitioner that he is now starting 6th term at SG.

To people with little understanding of Pathological Demand Avoidance (PDA), it may not look like much, but progress is massive. To see him begin to feel at ease with [his practitioner] has been amazing. There were days when he arrived at Stomping Grounds with his mental health at rock bottom, and he would walk out of the woods a different child. I would hear him laughing as I got close to site and the joy I felt is indescribable; only a parent who has experienced a child in mental health crisis can truly understand that. [His SG practitioner] is now one of only a few trusted adults in his life and he is able to discuss many things with her about his life and feelings.

[At Stomping Grounds] neurodiversity is celebrated and not seen as a barrier to be overcome, and children feel acceptance and understanding by being around their neuro-kin; it is a neuro-affirming space. Stomping Grounds do not advocate social skills training or masking. Sessions are child led – autonomy and collaboration are key to everything.” (Parent C)



3.5.2. Parent D

This parent chose to share feedback on their child's progress with their forest school practitioner. They describe a discussion they had when they collected their child from a group session, in which their child had recognised and celebrated achieving their own goal. Parent D also describes the wider impact of this progress, beyond our forest school setting:

“Max got in the car and said something amazing:

‘I’ve just smashed one of my goals – I spoke aloud to the group and I wanted to do it. I just thought to myself what is the worst that could happen? It didn’t feel too bad before and I felt really good afterwards.’

I really can’t express how tremendous this is. I am so grateful for the environment you have provided. Max has also ordered and paid for a bubble tea in Costa this week. When he was at school he couldn’t come downstairs and speak to his Gran and Grandpa, and now we have this – I’m pinching myself!”
(Parent D)



3.5.3. Professional partners

We work with various professional partners to offer specialist forest school provision, including schools and NHS services; here two of our partners describe the impact of our offer upon mental health and wellbeing, communication, self-confidence and self-regulation:

“Thank you for the support (our pupils) have received from yourselves since starting Stomping Grounds. We have witnessed our students develop mentally, socially and physically. We have seen their confidence and communication develop through the year. It has made a vast difference to their behaviour in school and general mental well-being, and they speak very positively about their days with you – so much so that they say they want to work for you!” (Assistant Headteacher, school)

“Just wanted to say a massive thank you for the wonderful forest session we were able to give to our families. Although we only had one family attend in the end, (which in itself highlights the difficulties our families have getting to these events), it was wonderful to see the child we worked with, his sibling and parent out in the forest. When we first started working with this family, this child wouldn’t have been able to leave the house, never mind engage with a new person in an unfamiliar setting.” (Clinical Psychologist)



4. KEY THEMES AND AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT

Our specialist provision is the epitome of Stomping Grounds' Theory of Change and reflects our TREE Values at its core. The case studies shared in this report highlight why our Values are at the forefront of everything we do and how our Theory of Change is delivered in practice in the woods.

Our values are Together, Responsible, Equality of Access and Enabling.

MISSION

To give children and families from all backgrounds the time and space to connect with nature, build relationships with the land and grow communities.

TOGETHER

We strive to be part of an ecology of services that creates a more holistic impact.

We actively partner with local organisations to best understand and serve the needs of communities.

**STOMPING
GROUNDS**

EQUALITY OF ACCESS

We prioritise work to those who would most benefit, which includes those with the least access.

We want to provide a mirror into the world of the great outdoors, so that all people can see themselves in wild spaces and therefore access the benefits. This includes committing to Positive Action practices to pro-actively support historically excluded groups access our services.

ENABLING

Our practice enables participants to find their own authentic selves.

By challenging our ego and subconscious bias, the language, communication and interactions we choose are thoughtful and conscious.

They do not seek to define, make assumptions based on labels or change children and young people and instead create and hold space for them to grow and thrive as whoever they choose to be.

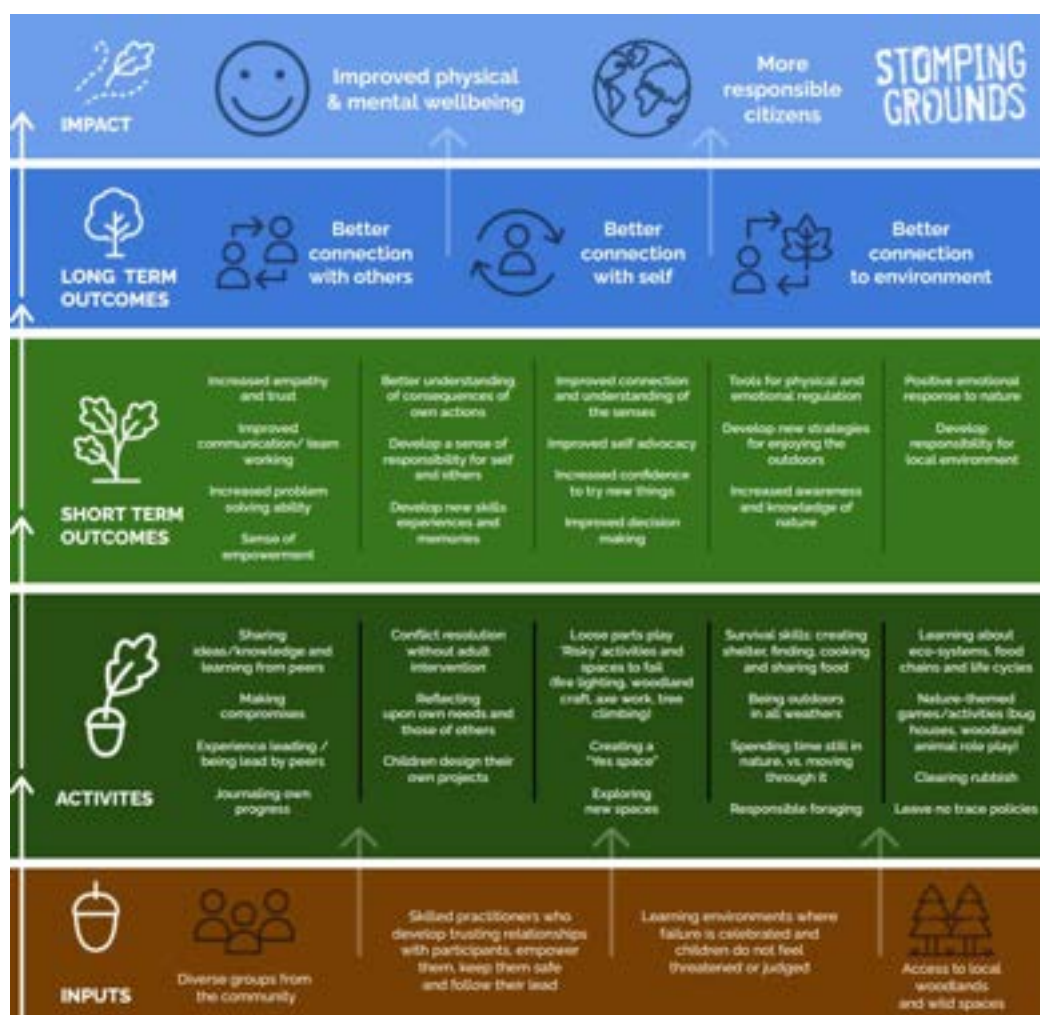
RESPONSIBLE

Our decisions are led by our responsibility to the planet.

Our organisation models sustainable practices in order to inspire others to do the same.



Here is a reminder of what our TOC looks like:





Analysis of our case study data has resulted in development of our model of delivery in specialist provision. Mapped onto this are our TOC categories, to illustrate how access to our specialist provision can result in change over time for the CYP. At this stage of evaluation and the young life of our specialist provision, the full Impact of our offer is yet to be realised; the following graphic reflects evaluation findings to the point of Long Term Outcomes in our TOC.

Specialist Provision model of delivery





Learning about the CYP - what do they need?

The graphic demonstrates the interconnectedness of relationships in a young person's life, whether as part of wider society and at policy level, in their local community and education/health organisations, with their family and peer networks, then with our organisation when they join our provision. Each aspect is impacted by the other and our role as Therapeutic forest school practitioners is often to mitigate those impacts upon the young person; we work in partnership with the CYP, their family, and linked professionals to identify any gaps, and then offering opportunities to feel safe, to connect and to grow.

Feeling safe

Once a CYP joins our provision, our Lead Team goes through a careful matching process as seen in the graphic at section 3.1. As the case studies illustrated, making a connection with the right practitioner for that CYP is vital to supporting their access to forest school; on the limited occasions where those connections have not worked, our Lead Team quickly responds to reassess and find a good fit.

This connection ensures the first steps into feelings of safety can begin. Please note, boundaries between 'stages' in this graphic are not fixed and there will be some blurring depending on the individual CYP, but it is largely representative of the journeys of CYP in the case studies shared and the CYP accessing our specialist provision.



This part of the model is observed within '**Safety**'; for our offer, this is us offering provision which is:

- Responsive
- Tailored
- Flexible
- Needs based
- Accessible
- Child-led
- Low demand

Feeling connected

Time spent within this 'Safety', to foster feeling safe and secure, might be short term, or might progress through to 'Connection', and can oscillate between stages. The skill of the practitioner and the activities undertaken at forest school will support the CYP to move into '**Connection**'.

'Connection' builds on 'Safety' by focusing on:

- Trust
- Validation
- Relationships
- Belonging
- Representation
- Nature
- Self-regulation



Moving within and across stages is supported by the practitioner at all times, with regular communications via written observations and review meetings with family members and linked professionals, and in communication with the CYP.

Opportunities for discovery

Once a CYP feels a sense of safety and connection, there are opportunities for **'Discovery'**:

- Identity
- Skills development
- Accessing other provision
- Employment

Skills development can refer to hard skills sets built in forest school, like green woodwork, or soft skills like self-esteem and confidence. It can also include our setting accessing funding and making connections with other organisations who have the knowledge and experience to scaffold out beyond our setting. For example, the Rank Foundation for employment skills, and Scotswood Community Nature Garden for Level 1 forest school training.

Clearly there will be movement within Safety, Connection and Discovery, as the CYP responds to other external influences upon their physical and mental wellbeing; our role is to meet the CYP where they are at on any given day when they arrive for a session. A CYP might access our provision at Connection then experience trauma and revert to Safety, for example. Our case study findings illustrate these interactions and how practitioners have responded to hold space for the CYP, ensuring they feel safe once more.



How can we improve?

We are beginning to see the impact of long term outcomes of our provision upon CYP, and it will be important to continue to evaluate the impact of our offer so we can identify areas of development. As our organisation expands its specialist provision offer, we are committed to:

- listening to and learning from the children and young people we work with
- listening to their families and other organisations involved with their care and responding reflexively in our practice
- continuing to expand the knowledge and skills of our delivery team to best meet the needs of our participants
- advocating for the children and families accessing our provision to support their continued physical and mental wellbeing.

Our case study findings highlight some areas to focus on in the coming year to further develop our specialist offer and considerations for evaluation:

- As our CYP grow, they need to make decisions about next steps; where can they go after forest school with us? If their funding ceases, or their EHCP changes, for example.
- Parent/carers discussed finding secondary schools with a flexible schooling arrangement to suit their CYP's needs - could SGNE connect with a secondary school whereby our provision is part of their education offer?
- We need evaluation data from partner organisations we work with to find out their perspective on our procedures, systems etc and feedback on impact on CYP in their setting.
- As some of our cohort of CYP leave our provision, we should maintain contact to learn about the wider, longer term impact of our provision.

5. Considerations for Q1-Q2 (Mar '23 – Aug '23) and the year ahead



5.1. Actions taken following recommendations made in Q1-Q2 (Mar-Aug2022)

Recommendations made in the last biannual report are listed below in Table A; those that are highlighted we have delivered/in the process of delivering during Q3-Q4. The remaining recommendations will be carried forward and/or amended/removed to reflect change within our organisation, to be considered in the next biannual report for Q1-Q2 (Mar - Aug 2023), see Table B.

5.1.1 Recommendations considered this biannual period Sept 22-Feb23

Improvements to evaluation

- Plan and deliver evaluation training with 2 lead practitioners who have successfully used evaluation tools in their provision, with the aim in mind for those practitioners to share with the wider team about how to effectively collect quality data from participants.
- Revisit the use of digital storytelling to support children and young people to share their own forest school stories from their own perspectives.
- Include a list of collaborators in each report: funders and awarded funds; partners e.g. schools, community organisations, charities etc.
- Design and deliver distinct evaluation packages for: Gibside Kindergarten, specialist provision, and School setting forest school.



Improvements to our provision, delivery, administration and organisation

- Develop and deliver a survey to collect the views of all partners we work with - what do we do well, what can we improve, what next?
- Develop a short digest of each bi-annual report to share on social media and with funders.
- Develop case studies (campaigns highlighting our successes) to support funding bids and contracts - focus on cases where we have had a significant impact e.g. specialist provision, Benwell Families. These anonymised case studies would share their successes via digital storytelling, illustrating how we use our resources to have the greatest impact - to share on social media platforms, with existing stakeholders and to support new partnership working.
- Find and report regional disability data, then reference it as a comparison for our data on disability. [10012022disabilityandemploymentreferencetables](#)
- Our next biannual report will 'Focus On': Specialist provision

5.2 Recommendations to improve evaluation, provision, delivery, administration and organisation for Q1-Q2 Mar-Aug 2023

Reflecting on our key achievements as reported here and lessons learned as we continue to design and deliver forest school provision, we present our recommendations for the next reporting period and beyond below:

5.2.1 Recommendations to consider next biannual period Mar - Aug 2023



Improvements to evaluation

- Focus on one area of our delivery within each biannual report.
- Plan and deliver evaluation training with 2 staff members as a skills development opportunity - evaluation team then undertake in person data collection, rather than online survey; see Reframing Autism project.
- Continue to build our portfolio of case studies for specialist provision, to reflect the diversity of participants accessing our setting.
- Include a list of collaborators in each report: funders and awarded funds; partners e.g. schools, community organisations, charities etc.
- Develop and deliver a survey to collect the views of all partners we work with - what do we do well, what can we improve, what next?
- Design and deliver distinct evaluation packages for: Gibside Kindergarten, school setting forest school.

Improvements to our provision, delivery, administration and organisation

- Disseminate findings of this report with specialist provision practitioners, discuss model of delivery, seek feedback.
- Beyond forest school - what next for CYP leaving our setting? For example, EOTAS not granted; YP turns 16. How can SG facilitate this step?
- Find/make connections/agreement with a school in the region which will agree to a flexible schooling arrangement whereby we are offered as part of their provision.
- Find and report regional disability data, then reference it as a comparison for our data on disability. [10012022disabilityandemploymentreferencetables](#)
- Our next biannual report will focus on Gibside Outdoor Kindergarten