



**Impacting on young people's  
emotional wellbeing through  
Forest School:**

**The Breeze Project, pilot year**

**Lucy Tiplady, August 2018**

**E · S · R · C  
ECONOMIC  
& SOCIAL  
RESEARCH  
COUNCIL**



# **Impacting on young people’s emotional wellbeing through Forest School:**

## **The Breeze Project, pilot year**

### **Contents**

Summary and key findings	3
Background	5
The Breeze Project	6
Case study 1: Hillhead Additionally Resourced Centre	7
Case study 2: Northgate School	11
Impact across the Breeze Project	15
Affordances and constraints	16
Conclusions and recommendations	17
References and appendixes	19

This work has been supported by the Economic and Social Research Council, Impact Acceleration Account (Grant Ref: ES/M500513/1, Newcastle University).

The author would like to thank all the children, young people, Scotswood Natural Community Garden and school staff involved in the Breeze Project and who worked in collaboration to collect and co-produce evidence of impact. In order to protect individuals, pseudonyms have been given to each of the schools who participated in the project. Thank you also to the members of the Breeze advisory group, Wilma Barrow, Jo Hume, Ahmed Kharrufa, David Leat, Harriet Menter, Samantha Shields and school staff who informed the ongoing practice of the project and research and who have provided valuable comments in the drafting of this report.

To cite this publication: Tiplady, L. (2018) Impacting on young people’s emotional wellbeing through Forest School: The Breeze Project, pilot year. Research Centre for Learning and Teaching, Newcastle University.

## Summary

### The Breeze Project

Breeze was led by Scotswood Natural Community Garden (SNCG), a small independent charity, and was funded by the Wellesley Trust Fund at the Community Foundation and St James's Place Foundation. The project aimed to use the Forest School approach in order to improve the emotional wellbeing of children and young people. Over a school year (September 2017 to July 2018) SNCG worked with two specialist schools with young people currently unable to participate in mainstream education due to extreme anxiety and/or behavioural and emotional difficulties. The project additionally aimed to create capacity within schools to continue the Forest School approach once funding had ended.

### Research

The research used a participatory design in order to work with stakeholders to collect and co-produce robust evidence of impact. Using a theory of change methodology, the outcomes of actions were evaluated and causal mechanisms explored within each individual context. This report has been written by Lucy Tiplady from the Research Centre for Learning and Teaching, Newcastle University, and was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council.

### Case studies

Two case studies are presented which explore the contexts of each school along with the different ways in which Breeze was implemented. The impact of Breeze is considered within each school, drawing upon a wide range of evidence including researcher observations, interview data with the Forest School practitioner, school staff, young people and parents, planning and evaluation documents, attendance data, behavioural records and social and emotional literacy assessments.

### Impacts across Breeze

Breeze has used the Forest School approach in order to facilitate a tailored offer for children and young people with complex emotional and behavioural difficulties. Impacts have been variable within and across case studies but across the project there is evidence of impact particularly in regard to student engagement, social skills and relationships and improved behaviour.

### Recommendations for schools and practitioners

The report considers the affordances and constraints experienced in the project and makes recommendations for schools and practitioners wishing to use the Forest School approach in order to impact upon the wellbeing of children and young people.



## **Key findings of the evaluation of Breeze, pilot year**

- The Forest School approach was generally well received by the children and young people, with one school experiencing improved attendance on Forest School days.
- There was evidence of young people developing their social relationships and skills whilst at Forest School and in one school of these skills being transferred back into the classroom.
- Where young people have difficulties with behaviour, Forest School appears to be an environment in which they are able to manage their behaviour more successfully.
- High adult to student ratios are important in supporting children and young people in their interactions and projects whilst at Forest School; where this was possible the greatest impacts were seen and where ratios were lower impacts were more variable across the young people.
- Forest School appears to be successful in facilitating conversations between children and young people and their families about school; taking home photographs and objects can be a key element in this.
- The partnership between the school and the Forest School practitioner and commitment to a joint plan-do-review cycle was important in drawing on the expertise of all and facilitating the planning and delivery of sessions tailored to the needs and interests of the young people.
- Committing to a partnership for a school year, alongside staff engagement in Forest School training, is effective in building capacity within schools to independently deliver Forest School.

## Background

### Children and young people's wellbeing and mental health

The emotional wellbeing and mental health of children and young people is of growing concern worldwide with the World Health Organization (WHO) estimating up to 20% of children and adolescents may suffer from a disabling mental illness (WHO, 2003). Mental health problems are responsible for the largest single source of world economic burden, estimated at a global cost of £1.6 trillion (Mental Health Foundation, 2015).

In the UK the most recent Child and Adolescent Mental Health survey was carried out by the Office for National Statistics in 2004, it reported that 10% of children and young people (aged 5-16 years) had a clinically diagnosable mental problem (Green et al., 2005). This is widely believed to have increased in recent years with children and adolescent mental health agencies struggling to cope with increased quantities and complexities of cases. Newcastle Gateshead Clinical Commissioning Group reported a 31% annual increase in demand for services in Newcastle in 2015 (Newcastle Gateshead, 2016) and Public Health England stated that 70% of children and adolescents who experienced mental health problems did not receive appropriate interventions at a sufficiently early age (Public Health England, 2015). Research further demonstrates that children from poorer backgrounds are significantly more likely to experience mental health difficulties, with children from the lowest income families in the UK four times more likely to have mental health problems than those from the highest earning backgrounds (Morrison Gutman et al. 2015).

The impact of pupil health and wellbeing on student attainment at school is recognised, with Public Health England stating that schools have 'statutory duties to promote children and young people's wellbeing' (2014 p.5). However, with an increasingly

prescriptive national curriculum and budgetary pressures, many schools are struggling to address the multiple and complex needs of their students.

### Forest School

Forest School<sup>1</sup> (FS) is an outdoor educational experience, usually in a wooded area, that takes place regularly over an extended period of time, led by a trained practitioner (Knight, 2011). Qualifications are in Levels 1 to 3 Forest School; Level 1 intended as an introduction to FS, Level 2 to qualify as a FS assistant and Level 3 to qualify as a FS leader, able to set up and run a Forest School provision. Sessions are designed to be learner-centred but typically include bushcraft (for example fire lighting, den making, tree climbing, and using tools for whittling and making wooden objects, arts and crafts), games, exploration of nature and reflection to support children's learning and development. FS has become increasingly popular across the UK and there is a developing body of research evidence of the positive benefits for young people (as well as teachers, parents and extended families) (Maynard, 2007; Ridgers, Knowles & Sayers, 2012; Smith, Dunhill & Scott, 2017; Waite & Goodenough, 2018) and some evidence specifically relating to young people's emotional wellbeing and behaviour (O'Brien & Murray, 2007; Roe & Aspinall, 2011).

### Scotswood Natural Community Garden

Scotswood Natural Community Garden<sup>2</sup> (SNCG) is an award winning independent charity based in Newcastle upon Tyne. Established in 1995, the 2.5 acre garden includes wildflower meadows, woodland, ponds, heritage orchards, fruit and vegetable gardens. The garden is located in the heart of one of the most deprived neighbourhoods of the UK, classified in the highest 10% for income, health and crime deprivation in the UK (DCLG, 2015). SNCG have been running and providing training in Forest

<sup>1</sup> See: <https://www.forestschoollassociation.org/what-is-forest-school/>

<sup>2</sup> See: <https://sncg.org.uk/>

## BREEZE: IMPACTING ON YOUNG PEOPLE'S EMOTIONAL WELLBEING THROUGH FOREST SCHOOL

School for eight years and are one of the leading providers in the region.

### The Breeze Project

Breeze aimed to use the Forest School approach in order to improve the emotional wellbeing of two groups of young people currently unable to participate in mainstream schooling due to extreme anxiety and/or behavioural and emotional difficulties. The Education Manager from SNCG, an experienced Forest School practitioner, worked in partnership with staff from the schools to co-deliver a tailored Forest School intervention for each group of young people. Each group committed to attending Forest School for one day a week for a school year (September 2017 – July 2018) and to two members of staff engaging in Forest School training (one Level 3 and a second Level 1). Sessions were designed to help build confidence and wellbeing; providing fun, achievable challenges in a supportive environment, developing good relationships with leaders, structured reflection, and encouraging children and young people to internalise positive self-narratives that emerged. After each session the FS practitioner and school staff planned to meet to evaluate the session, discuss progress of each young person and plan next sessions. The researcher also contributed to the evaluation of sessions through feeding back researcher collected data on a regular basis. A steering group of experts met quarterly in order to inform the ongoing practice of the project and research.

### The Research

The researcher from the Centre for Learning and Teaching (CfLaT) at Newcastle University worked in partnership with SNCG and the schools from September 2017 to June 2018 to gather robust evidence of the impact of Breeze. Through a participatory design, the researcher collected and co-produced evidence of impact using a theory of change methodology. Theory of change evaluates change by articulating the context and intended outcomes through actions and gathering a portfolio

of evidence to support, refute and/or explore the causal mechanisms at work (Laing and Todd, 2015).

### Developing a Theory of Change

The theory of change was developed through in-depth interviews with staff from SNCG and the schools taking into account each individual context together with the aims and ambitions of stakeholders.

Three strands of action were identified:

1. Children and young people experience an improvement in their emotional wellbeing.
2. Children and young people develop the emotional and behavioural skills necessary to be ready to learn.
3. Forest School is recognised as an effective strategy for impacting on children and young people's emotional wellbeing and readiness to learn.

Steps of change were developed for each strand (for further details see Appendix 1) and an evaluation plan produced based upon evidencing the theory of change. Over the project a range of quantitative and qualitative data was collected and co-produced between the stakeholders and researcher. This included:

- researcher observations of 15 FS sessions with each school;
- interview data with the Forest School practitioner and school staff;
- interview data with the participating young people (facilitated using a range of visual and participatory methods such as photo-elicitation, drawings and diaries/journals);
- parent interviews;
- Forest School planning and evaluation documents;
- student attendance data;
- student behavioural data;
- and student social and emotional literacy assessments.

This data was used as evidence (or lack of it) to support or refute the steps of change as theorised.

## **CASE STUDY 1**

### **Hillhead Primary Additionally Resourced Centre (ARC)**

Hillhead ARC provides education for up to 12 primary aged children (4-11 years) currently unable to access mainstream education due to emotional and behavioural difficulties. Children may have additional diagnosed or undiagnosed special educational needs or disabilities. Children typically spend 18-24 months at the ARC, with the intention of reintegrating into mainstream education where possible. Where it becomes apparent that mainstream education is not appropriate to the child's needs, children transfer to specialist provision as places become available.

The research focused upon five children who were enrolled in the ARC at the time Breeze began. The children were aged 5, 8, 10, 10 and 10 years. At the start of the intervention school staff welcomed the opportunity for children to engage in learning in an alternative environment, for the children to become more comfortable interacting with their peers and a range of adults and for them to develop skills to behave appropriately in different environments. The school also welcomed the opportunity for teaching staff to be trained in Forest School, thus increasing capacity within the unit.



## **Impacts**

### **Engagement**

Across the data collected, young people, teachers and parents all stated how well the Breeze intervention was received by the young people. Teachers and parents noted that the young people were always happy to attend Forest School, a significant factor given that they would often refuse to engage in school and other activities.

The young people frequently commented that they felt Forest School was 'fun' and that they appreciated the opportunities to 'get outdoors', run around, experience nature, and take part in bushcraft activities which felt very different compared to school or home.

*Really enjoyed it, it's the most fun day of the week, pure amazing! (Young person)*

*I like watching the birds and seeing what they do, how they move and how they live their lives as a bird. (Young person)*

This engagement is also reflected in attendance data with four out of the five children having increased attendance of Forest School days; for two children there was an 8% increase on Forest School days and taken as a group a mean increase of 2% (for more information see Appendix 4).

### **Perception of self and increased confidence**

Part of the Forest School approach is a commitment to young people experiencing success and this was felt to be particularly significant to these young people as their histories had involved a number of unsuccessful experiences.



## BREEZE: IMPACTING ON YOUNG PEOPLE'S EMOTIONAL WELLBEING THROUGH FOREST SCHOOL

Observational data highlighted the successes the young people experienced, along with the frustrations in tasks such as fire lighting and designing and creating wooden objects or structures and the ways in which the young people were supported and developed strategies to overcome such frustrations.

In reflection some young people commented on feeling 'proud' about certain achievements and teachers believed that these successes resulted in increased confidence and greater risk taking among the young people.



At the beginning of the intervention, the group typically found social interactions difficult, with group work activities in class often ending in confrontation. Observational data highlighted that many of the young people would engage in their own activities, in some cases heavily supported by an adult. Over the school year this adult support was slowly withdrawn and the young people began interacting more with their peers, developing skills in communication and negotiation and enjoying their time with one another. This was seen in the observational data and reported by both a parent and teachers in interview.

*I think that they see themselves as experts now in different things, some of the children aren't necessarily academically strong but they have been able to achieve in different ways and roles within the class. (Teacher)*

*Henry in the last couple of weeks has really blossomed, he's taking a lot more safe risks like tree climbing which he would never do in the beginning, he's pushing himself more. (Teacher)*

*I'm proud of my bench. I had a problem with the nail, it was in the wrong place, it took me a while to get the nail out but I didn't give up. (Young person)*

Observational data further demonstrated the skills the young people developed over the intervention period which enabled them to become more independent in activities such as putting up their own hammocks, building and cooking on fires and building dens and tree structures.

### Relationships and social interaction

Another significant feature of Forest School is to provide opportunities for young people to form positive relationships with others.

*Well it's that team building and getting on with others, which he can find difficult, you know social skills and in school they would fall out with each other but doing this seemed to bring them together. (Parent)*

*For the first time in the last few weeks we're seeing him playing more imaginatively with others at Forest School, like the other week when he had a sword fight and playing pirates ... he was actively playing in a way we've not really seen anywhere else. (Teacher)*

*Recently Sally and Trey worked together to build a design; she was happy to accept someone else's ideas and build a plan with someone else, in the past it would be her way and she was very dismissive of others. (Teacher)*

## BREEZE: IMPACTING ON YOUNG PEOPLE'S EMOTIONAL WELLBEING THROUGH FOREST SCHOOL

At the start of the project teachers reported that the young people found interactions with new adults difficult and would often behave inappropriately making it difficult to engage in a range of activities outside of the classroom and in their leisure time with families. In addition to working with the Forest School practitioner and researcher, a further feature of Breeze was that the Forest School sessions took place in a community garden which was used for a variety of purposes including providing opportunities for volunteers. Over the intervention period this facilitated supported opportunities for the young people to interact with a range of adults.

*For quite a period of time he'd be off helping the volunteers, if he thought he was doing something useful, like when he helped them to move the wood chippings with the wheel barrow to make the path, he wanted to feel like an adult ... being able to work with the volunteers and being able to show respect for strangers and interact appropriately. (Teacher)*

*Generally they are more accepting of change. Forest School has given them experiences of working with different people and on different activities. Henry used to find change very difficult but he's really built his confidence to interact with a range of adults. (Teacher)*

### Behaviour

Teachers reported that the young people found it easier to manage their behaviour at Forest School. This view was supported by behavioural records<sup>3</sup> of four students over the research period (data was

unavailable for one student) which demonstrated less recorded behavioural incidents at Forest School compared to school for all young people (for individual and group means see Appendix 4). Additionally, one parent used Forest School as a motivational strategy to help his son manage the school week, which in turn the young person used to help his peers.

*Steven's behaviour has really improved recently, he's been here three years and we've seen the biggest change in the last six months. Dad used to say "you just have to get to Wednesday and then it's Forest School" ... That then caught on and Steven was saying it to the others to help them and now they all say it. (Class teacher)*

### Beyond Forest School

In interview young people struggled to make connections between their experiences at Forest School and learning at school, seeing the two as very different. However, the class teachers and a parent both commented on how Forest School had been a motivating factor in helping the young people to engage in learning in school by framing the week and making it feel more manageable. The class teacher reported that they had experienced a greater degree of engagement in class since starting Forest School.

*Now even though they are spending less time in class they have more in their books than this time last year because before they would refuse to do any work for maybe three out of five days. (Class teacher)*

<sup>3</sup> The school uses the ABC (Antecedent, Behaviour, Consequence) method of recording problematic behaviour.

## BREEZE: IMPACTING ON YOUNG PEOPLE'S EMOTIONAL WELLBEING THROUGH FOREST SCHOOL

It was also identified that the young people often took objects or pictures home from Forest School and this provided opportunities for the young people to share their experiences with their families. The class teacher reported that one girl who was reluctant to have her photograph taken in class, embraced the opportunity whilst at Forest School and enjoyed sharing the pictures with her family. In another case, the young person's success at Forest School developed into attending a Saturday group at the community garden with his mother.

*Henry's mam absolutely loves the Forest School, she has started taking him to a Saturday group. I think it's the only activity that he does out of school so the fact that he's keen to go and his mam has the confidence to take him somewhere like that is significant. Somewhere she thinks he's actually going to manage, it says something about his behaviour that she can take him. (Teacher)*

### Forest School at Hillhead

The teachers and senior leadership at Hillhead ARC are convinced of the positive impact that Forest School has had upon their pupils. Over the intervention period one class teacher has completed Level 3 Forest School training and a second Level 1. The teachers have gradually taken on more of the planning and delivery of sessions and are confident that they will be able to continue to deliver sessions one day a week next school year with some distance support from the Forest School practitioner.



### Steven

After a gradual introduction Steven settled into Forest School well; he enjoyed making bows and arrows and would initially do this on his own along with other small craft projects. At first Steven found it difficult to accept guidance on tasks and was often dismissive of advice given. However, in time Steven was able to work in partnership with adult members of the group, for example in building and lighting a fire where he followed advice and accepted reassurance over his anxiety about fire. Steven developed his hammock and den building skills and slowly began interacting more with others members of the group – inviting them into his den, inviting them to try his swing and later on working with others to build tree dens and structures. Steven enjoyed making a pewter pendant for his dad and on his last session he asked to take a wooden reindeer home for his mam. During sessions there were occasions when Steven became upset (often either because he felt anxious about an activity or he became upset with other group members), in most cases staff were able to distract him with an activity or he took himself away from the group to give himself time to calm down.

We used attendance and behavioural data collected by the school to track Steven over a one year period; in the first term he received no Forest School, in the second term two half day sessions in school and four half day sessions at the Forest School site and in the third term he attended Forest School for a full day once a week. Steven's attendance dramatically improved throughout the three terms, from 51% in term 1 to 85% in term 3. Steven was also able to manage his behaviour better with the mean number of recorded behavioural incidents per session (am or pm) reducing from 0.94 in term 2 to 0.32 in term 3. Further, the mean number of recorded behavioural incidents at Forest School sessions was lower again at 0.24.

In interview teachers and school staff reported that they believed Steven's improvement in behaviour was directly related to the Forest School project Breeze and described how Steven and his family used Forest School as a motivational factor to get through the week and how Steven further used this strategy to help his peers.

## CASE STUDY 2

### Northgate School

Northgate School is a secondary specialist provision for young people who have a history of non-attendance in education due to severe anxiety. Students may have additional developmental disabilities or conditions such as Autism Spectrum Disorder or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder and/or have experienced trauma. Some young people have been at the school for a number of years, whilst others attend for short periods before returning to their home school, resulting in a high number of in year transfers. The school aims to deliver a broad and balanced curriculum that meets the needs and circumstances of its pupils.

During the intervention period the school experienced an especially high number of in year transfers, resulting in the group attending Forest School increasing to a possible 20 if all students were in attendance. The students varied in age (11-15 years), some with multiple and complex needs that necessitated a high degree of adult support. Unfortunately this also coincided with the teacher who had been leading on and Level 3 trained in Forest School not being available due to long term sickness. The Forest School practitioner planned and delivered all sessions with the support of a learning support assistant who completed Level 1 Forest School training. Some successes were seen, the group reported generally enjoying Forest School and appreciated the opportunity to be outdoors and spend time with friends. However, a smaller number of students appeared to be struggling and it was felt that the student to adult ratio was not high enough to support the progression and success of all young people. The school usually sent three members of staff to work with the Forest School practitioner; this included the learning support assistant trained in Level 1 Forest School and the other members of staff varied. In the third school term the decision was taken to reduce the group to 11 of the younger students. The reduction in numbers enabled staff to

work much more effectively with students and to support their needs and learning whilst at Forest School.

### Impact

#### Engagement

The majority of young people reported enjoying Forest School with many appreciating the opportunity to be outdoors, enjoy more space, connection with nature and being with friends. Running and chasing games were popular with the group and they embraced the opportunity to make use of the space at Forest School.

*It's good, nice ... being outside in nature, it's nice to relax, I find it very relaxing.*

(Young person)

*Being outdoors, learning in a fun way and being with friends.*

(Young person)

*It's good, you're outside, not in school, you feel more free.*

(Young person)

*It's a great place to get active and you can let your imagination go wild!*

(Young person)

School staff and parents also reported that the opportunities at Forest School were generally very different to those usually experienced by the young people. The school provides specialist provision and teaching but is currently situated in two corridors of a mainstream secondary school, with limited outside space or specialist learning spaces.

#### Integrating new students and developing relationships

One of the most significant impacts of Forest School seen at Northgate was in relation to integrating new

## BREEZE: IMPACTING ON YOUNG PEOPLE'S EMOTIONAL WELLBEING THROUGH FOREST SCHOOL

students and providing an environment in which the young people could develop their relationships with one another. School staff reported that Forest School was generally well received by new students and that they believed Forest School fostered a range of relationships and friendships not always seen within school.

*It's a venue where they can form different friendships, with adults like Harriet but also with each other, there are students who work together at Forest School who wouldn't interact that much in school. (Learning Support Assistant)*

*The social element is important as well because a lot of our students have had unsuccessful experiences in other schools ... Forest School has helped massively with that. (Senior Leader)*

The young people also identified friendships as an important part of Forest School; they generally appreciated the opportunity to spend time with friends and some also embraced the opportunity to make new friendships.

*Yes, it's a good place to socialise with friends. (Young person)*

*We get to cook things, have lots of yummy snacks, we can share things ... We can also get to know each other a bit better, we can chat more. I've got to know Emma better because we never really talk at school. (Young person)*



### Overcoming anxieties and achieving success

The Forest School approach is committed to ensuring that all young people achieve success and for many of the young people from Northgate overcoming anxieties was an important part in this process. For some young people the outdoor environment itself seemed to have a positive influence.

*Well it takes her mind off what she is worrying about, she worries a lot, about everything, she can't sleep, she can't let it go, but Forest School seemed to occupy her. She enjoyed making things out of wood that she had found and she would bring them home and show us. (Parent)*

*In school he can find the busyness difficult, there's too much going on, but at Forest School he had that sense of space. (Parent)*



## BREEZE: IMPACTING ON YOUNG PEOPLE'S EMOTIONAL WELLBEING THROUGH FOREST SCHOOL

Some of the young people were able to support and encourage one another.

*I used to be really worried about it (climbing trees) and couldn't do it but Milly and David helped me, they supported me and encouraged me, Milly was like "You can do it!" and now I can climb the lower branches, on the trees I know are stable. (Young person)*

Whilst others needed adult support in order to overcome anxieties or difficulties. Observations suggested a mixed impact across the young people with greater successes seen once the student numbers were reduced. Observed outcomes included: greater participation, increased risk taking, a more confident approach to activities, improved listening and communication skills and improved bushcraft skills enabling students to develop their den building and craft projects. These successes were variable across the young people.



### Reflection and perception of self

An integral part of Forest School is to facilitate opportunities for the young people to reflect upon their experiences and successes, thereby internalising positive narratives about themselves and for some this was achieved. For others the process of verbal reflection was challenging but in some instances

feedback from parents, teachers and other data was suggestive of impact.

*The first time I went to Forest School I felt quite nervous, I had a phobia about fires but now I really like building fires and using the flint and steel, you just have to be careful of sparks ... I feel pretty proud that I've actually done that now. (Young person)*

*Well it's doing something he has never dreamed of doing, before we struggled to get him outdoors, he wouldn't even go on a school trip, but he really took to the Forest School and that's given him confidence. (Parent)*

Student self-assessed emotional literacy questionnaire data <sup>4</sup> from five students who completed the full year at Forest School showed an overall mean improvement of only 1 point (out of 100) from December 2017 to June 2018, although there was variability across young people (for student scores see Appendix 4).

### Behaviour

The students from Northgate presented with a range of behaviours; some were quiet and withdrawn at times, whilst others were more oppositional with staff. This created a range of challenges for the Forest School practitioner and school staff as they needed to adapt their approaches quite considerably across the group. However, particularly in the last Forest School term, where student numbers were lower, school staff reported that those young people that did have difficulties managing their behaviour appeared to

<sup>4</sup> Using the GL Assessment of Emotional Literacy, student checklist.

## BREEZE: IMPACTING ON YOUNG PEOPLE'S EMOTIONAL WELLBEING THROUGH FOREST SCHOOL

have more successes at Forest School. Some of the young people additionally noticed the impact Forest School had on their peers.

*Duncan can be different at Forest School too, at school he's a lot more hyper but at Forest School he's calmer, perhaps because he has space to run around. (Young person)*

### Charlie

Charlie joined Northgate and Forest School in the third term. School staff reported that he was struggling to cope in class and that his behaviour towards staff and peers had been problematic. However, Charlie demonstrated an immediate love for Forest School and joined in with a wide variety of activities including tree climbing, using tools to make wooden objects, den building, fire building and cooking and pond dipping. He was very physically able and enjoyed the challenges Forest School could provide, but he was also able to work with others in group tasks and although he needed some support in his interactions and consideration towards some members of the group, this was generally successful. Charlie became an able fire builder and would often take on the role of chef, happily cooking for his peers and the adults in the group. At the time the research period ended Charlie had been attending Forest School for approximately two months; during this time his attendance at school had been variable with a mean of 68%, however on Forest School days his attendance mean was 80%. In school Charlie continued to have difficulties, particularly with his interactions with others, but staff welcomed the fact that Charlie was able to have much more successful days whilst at Forest School.

### Jim

Jim was often quiet on arrival at Forest School and would frequently withdraw, refuse to participate and pull his hat over his face. In interview he described to the researcher how he found the Forest School environment stressful in that he felt he did not know what to do, he had too many choices and that he found choosing who to work with difficult; this was in contrast to the classroom where he felt he more easily understood what was expected and most work was done individually. Another issue was that he felt physically uncomfortable and did not enjoy sitting on the ground or low benches. To address this concern a chair was taken into the Forest School area for Jim to sit on and this immediately appeared to alleviate some of his concerns. With the support of adults Jim began to integrate into the group; at first in a watching capacity and later in actively building and lighting fire, whittling wood and playing with others. Towards the end of the intervention when the researcher asked Jim how he felt about Forest School he replied "Good, well I've been finding it a bit better".

### Forest School at Northgate

School staff and senior leadership were enthusiastic about the benefits of Forest School, particularly in relation to the integration of new students and in developing relationships. A learning support assistant completed Level 1 in Forest Schools and engaged in the planning, delivery and evaluation of sessions, thereby considerably developing her practice. However, on-going staffing issues throughout the project and the absence of a class teacher meant that the school were not able to take responsibility for the planning and delivery of sessions as anticipated. The school is currently considering options for taking the Forest School approach forward for its students and developing capacity further within their staff.

## Impact across Breeze

Across the project it has been evident that working with young people with complex emotional and behavioural difficulties is challenging and necessitates a varied approach with individuals according to their needs. The plan-do-review cycle within Breeze facilitated this and examined the progress of each young person on a weekly basis. This tailored approach, together with the differing contexts and implementation within each case study school, has had the effect that impact has also been varied, both within and across case study schools. Nevertheless, there are a number of themes that have been identified across the data.

### Engagement

The vast majority of young people were enthusiastic about attending Forest School; for some the time away from the classroom and the opportunity to spend time with friends was important, others developed a keen interest and appreciation of nature and/or love of bushcraft.

At Hillhead ARC, the children's enthusiasm for Forest School and willingness to engage was notable and was also reflected in improved attendance on Forest School days. At Northgate most young people were also keen to attend Forest School, although there were a smaller number of young people who found engagement difficult; where adults were able to support interactions, this was generally successful.

### Social relationships and skills

Forest School provides opportunities for young people to work together supported by adults. In both case studies there was evidence of increased integration within the group and among individuals the development of speaking and listening skills, the ability to work and/or play with others, and the development of friendships.

At Hillhead ARC teachers additionally noted the increased ability of the young people to work with a range of adults and to interact appropriately.

### Behaviour

At Hillhead ARC we saw a reduced number of recorded behavioural incidents at Forest School compared to the classroom over the intervention period. Teachers and parents reported that Forest School had been a key element in behavioural improvement and that young people see Forest School as a place where they can manage their behaviour well.

At Northgate School there were also cases where school staff reported that the young people were able to manage their behaviour more effectively at Forest School than in the classroom and as result had more successful experiences at Forest School.

### Overcoming anxieties and achieving success

Part of the Forest School approach is a commitment to all young people achieving success and the plan-do-review cycle sought to facilitate this on a weekly basis for individuals. In both case studies there is evidence of young people working through frustrations, overcoming anxieties and achieving success; this was most often seen where adult to student ratios were high enough to facilitate this.

Towards the end of the intervention there was evidence of greater risk taking and a more confident approach to activities among some young people. School staff from Hillhead ARC were able to reduce the adult support given and saw increased group work among young people. Teachers from Hillhead believed that the young people had increased in confidence and that Forest School had improved their perception of self.



### Beyond Forest School

In both case studies many of the young people enjoyed taking home objects and/or photographs from Forest School with parents reporting that this facilitated conversations about Forest School.

At Hillhead teachers believed that the children's engagement in Forest School further facilitated their engagement in learning at school; this appeared to be primarily through making the school week appear more manageable to the young people, leading to greater engagement in class.

## Affordances

### Partnership between school and Forest School practitioner

A significant feature of Breeze was the partnership between each of the case study schools and the Forest School practitioner. Each school committed to the class teacher working in collaboration with the practitioner and engaging in partnership in the weekly plan-do-review cycle. This enabled the planning and delivery of tailored Forest School sessions, drawing on the expertise of both the Forest School practitioner and class teacher, and tailored to the needs and interests of the young people.

Schools also committed to staff engaging in Forest School training and the intention was for school staff to take on more of the responsibility for planning and delivering sessions towards the end of the intervention; this was intended to build capacity within the schools so that school staff could continue delivering sessions once the funding for Breeze had ended. This was achieved at Hillhead ARC where the school is currently planning its second year of Forest School, which the class teachers will plan and deliver with some distance support from the Forest School practitioner.

### High adult to student ratios

Within Breeze the greatest successes and progress was seen where the young people were supported by high adult to student ratios (approximately 1 adult to 2 students). This was particularly important towards the beginning of the intervention in enabling adults to support the young people in their projects and relationships with others, thereby ensuring that students were able to succeed. In time adults were able to reduce the support offered as students became more independent and could work/play with their peers more effectively.

### Long-term commitment to Forest School

Schools committed to Breeze for an entire school year; during this time a number of students joined and left each of the case study schools but the long-term commitment meant that there was time to manage and respond to the varying needs of the young people. The circumstances of each young person varied considerably and whilst some made progress in a relatively short space of time, others required much longer.

Additionally, where schools were able to provide consistent staffing at Forest School, the long-term commitment enabled school staff to develop their practice with the support of the Forest School practitioner.

## Constraints

### High student mobility

Each of the case study schools experienced high student mobility with young people joining and leaving the group at short notice throughout the intervention period. Nevertheless, it is recognised that this was unavoidable and relatively common within these types of specialist provisions.

## Young people's review and reflection

Review and reflection is an important part of the Forest School approach, however, despite trialling a variety of approaches with the young people (including using photographs, drawings and Forest School journals) the majority of students found progressing from descriptive accounts challenging.

## Staffing

Both case study schools experienced difficulties in staffing which meant that the school staff engaged in Breeze were not always consistent. Where staff were able to engage throughout the project, they were able to develop their own Forest School practice, contribute to planning and reflection of sessions and make connections between Forest School and the students' classroom experiences.

## Outside factors

Across Breeze there was evidence of young people developing skills, relationships and behaviours. However, it was also the case that individuals could be experiencing complex and chaotic events in their home lives, which inevitably impacted upon school and Forest School. In extreme cases young people could regress and impact was difficult to sustain.

## Conclusions and recommendations

Breeze aimed to use the Forest School approach in order to improve the emotional wellbeing of two groups of young people currently unable to participate in mainstream schooling due to extreme anxiety and/or behavioural and emotional difficulties. Throughout the intervention we have seen examples of how the Forest School approach impacted upon the lives of the young people both during sessions and beyond. The theory of change methodology has drawn upon a wide range of evidence, which together has highlighted themes of impact that run across the data.

At the start of the intervention, interviews with school staff and the Forest School practitioner identified three strands of action where impact was anticipated. These were:

1. Children and young people experience improvement in their emotional wellbeing
2. Children and young people develop the emotional and behavioural skills necessary to be ready to learn
3. Forest School is recognised as an effective strategy for impacting on children and young people's emotional wellbeing and readiness to learn

Within the case studies we have seen differences in context and implementation and so it is not surprising that we have also seen differences in impact. Appendixes 2 and 3 reflect the progress made by each case study school throughout Breeze. For individual young people impact has been significant, although it has also been variable within and across case studies.

There is currently a developing body of research evidence of the benefits of the Forest School approach and Breeze contributes towards this, particularly in relation to young people who are experiencing difficulties in relation to their emotional wellbeing. Further research could usefully explore the themes of impact identified, together with

## BREEZE: IMPACTING ON YOUNG PEOPLE'S EMOTIONAL WELLBEING THROUGH FOREST SCHOOL

evaluating the sustainability of impact for children and young people.

### Recommendations for schools and Forest School practitioners

Drawing on the experiences and research from Breeze we would make the following recommendations to schools and practitioners wanting to use the Forest School approach:

- High adult to student ratios are effective in supporting young people with emotional and/or behavioural difficulties to develop skills and relationships through Forest School.
- Where young people have difficulties with behaviour, Forest School appears to be an environment in which they can more easily manage their behaviour. These successful experiences may also impact on their behaviour at other times.
- Forest School appears to be immediately engaging to many young people who appreciate the outdoors context and contrast to the classroom environment and expectations. However, some individuals may find this difference difficult to manage at first.
- Careful consideration needs to be given to facilitate review and reflection among young people with complex emotional and behavioural needs. Where young people find this process difficult, a range of evidence from observations, school staff, parents and school data can be drawn upon to inform the on-going planning of Forest School sessions.
- Forest School can be successful in facilitating conversations between young people and families. Being able to take objects and photographs home from Forest School appears to be an important part of this process.
- For schools new to Forest School, engaging in a long-term partnership with a fully qualified Forest School practitioner is an effective

approach of drawing on the expertise of both the practitioner and school staff. Committing to a plan-do-review strategy facilitates this partnership and the tailored progression of each young person.

- In order to create capacity within schools and the sustainability of the Forest School approach, staff should engage in Forest Schools training with at least one member of school staff qualified in Level 3 Forest School.

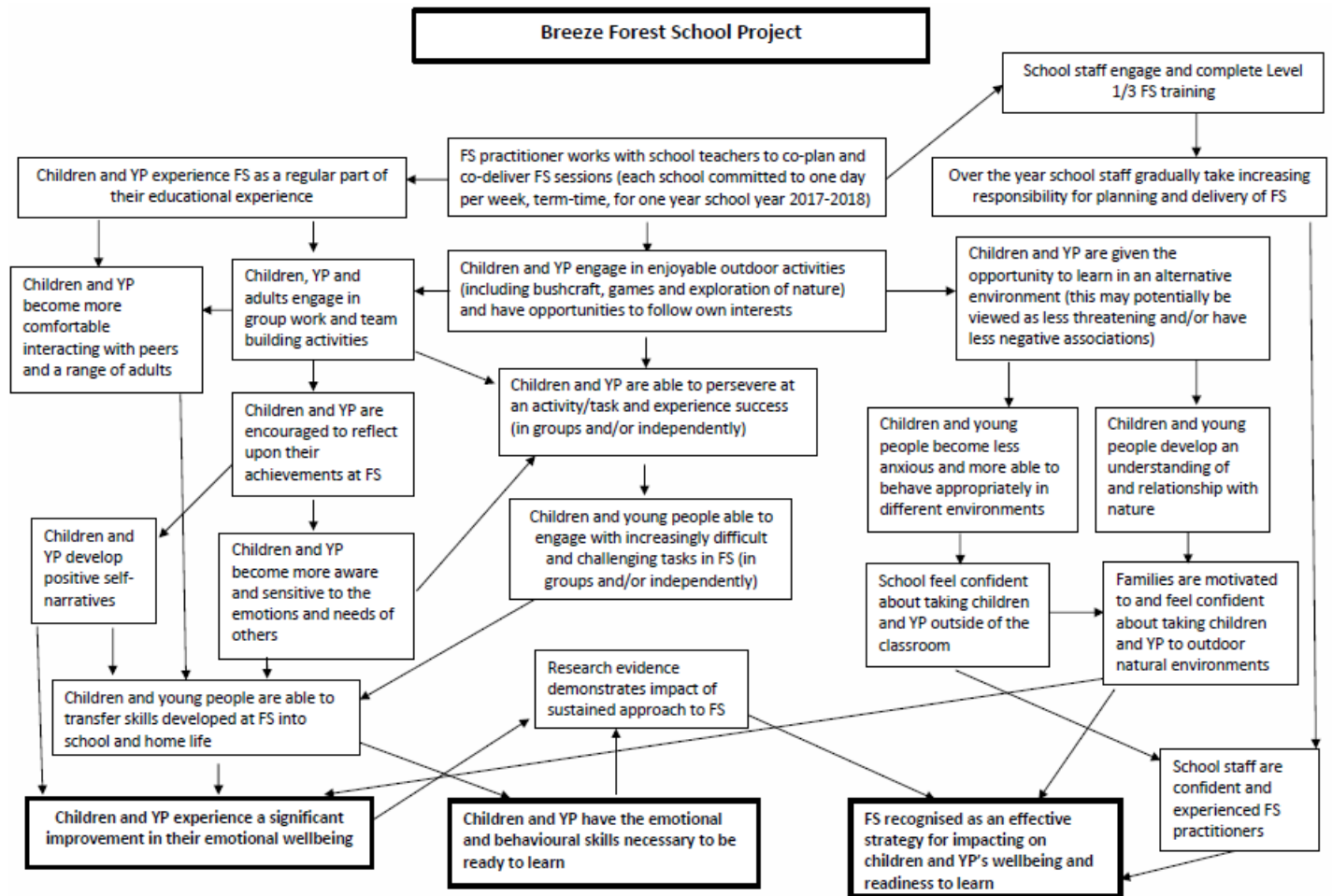
## BREEZE: IMPACTING ON YOUNG PEOPLE'S EMOTIONAL WELLBEING THROUGH FOREST SCHOOL

### References

- DCLG (2015) *English Indices of Deprivation 2015*. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/english-indices-of-deprivation-2015>
- Green H, McGinnity A, Meltzer H, Ford T, Goodman R (2005) *Mental health of children and young people in Great Britain, 2004*. A survey carried out by the Office for National Statistics on behalf of the Department of Health and the Scottish Executive. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Knight, S. (2011) *Forest School for All*. London: Sage.
- Laing, K. and Todd, L. (eds) (2015) *Theory-based Methodology: Using theories of change in educational development, research and evaluation*. Research Centre for Learning and Teaching, Newcastle University. Available at: <https://www.ncl.ac.uk/media/wwwnclacuk/cflat/files/theory-based-methodology.pdf>
- Maynard, T. (2007) Forest Schools in Great Britain: an initial exploration, *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, Vol 8: 4.
- Mental Health Foundation (2015) Fundamental facts about Mental Health. [Online] Available at: <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/publications/fundamental-facts-about-mental-health-2015>
- Morrison Gutman, L., Joshi, H., Pasonage, M. and Schoon, I. (2015) *Children of the New Century: Mental health findings from the Millennium Cohort Study*, Centre for Mental Health, London.
- Newcastle Gateshead (2016) *Our Case for Change 'Expanding Minds, Improving Lives'* Available at: <http://www.newcastlegatesheadccg.nhs.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Our-case-for-change-version-1-22-January-2016-1.pdf>
- O'Brien, L. & Murray, R. (2007) Forest School and its impacts on young children: Case studies in Britain, *Urban Forestry & Urban Greening*, 6: 249-265.
- Office for National Statistics (1999) *The mental health of children and adolescents in Great Britain*. London: Office for National Statistics.
- Public Health England (2015) *Early adolescence: Applying All Our Health*. [Online] Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/early-adolescence-applying-all-our-health>
- Public Health England (2014) *The link between pupil health and wellbeing and attainment: A briefing for head teachers, governors and staff in education setting*, Public Health England: London. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-link-between-pupil-health-and-wellbeing-and-attainment>
- Ridgers, N.D., Knowles, Z.R. and Sayers, J. (2012) Encouraging play in the natural environment: a child-focused case study of Forest School, *Children's Geographies*, 10: 1, 49-65.
- Roe, J. & Aspinall, P. (2011) The restorative outcomes of forest school and conventional school in young people with good and poor behaviour, *Urban Forestry and Urban Greening*, 10: 205-212.
- Smith, M.A., Dunhill, A. and Scott, G.W. (2017) Fostering children's relationship with nature: exploring the potential of Forest School, *Education 3-13*, DOI: [10.1080/03004279.2017.1298644](https://doi.org/10.1080/03004279.2017.1298644)
- UNICEF Office of Research (2013) *Child well-being in rich countries: A comparative overview*. Italy: UNICEF Office of Research. Available at: [https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/rc11\\_eng.pdf](https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/rc11_eng.pdf)
- Waite, S. and Goodenough, A. (2018) What is different about Forest School? Creating a space for an alternative pedagogy in England. *Journal of Outdoor and Environmental Education* 21: 25-44. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42322-017-0005-2>
- WHO (2003) *Caring for children and adolescents with mental disorders: Setting WHO directions*. [Online] Geneva: World Health Organization. Available at: [http://www.who.int/mental\\_health/media/en/785.pdf](http://www.who.int/mental_health/media/en/785.pdf)

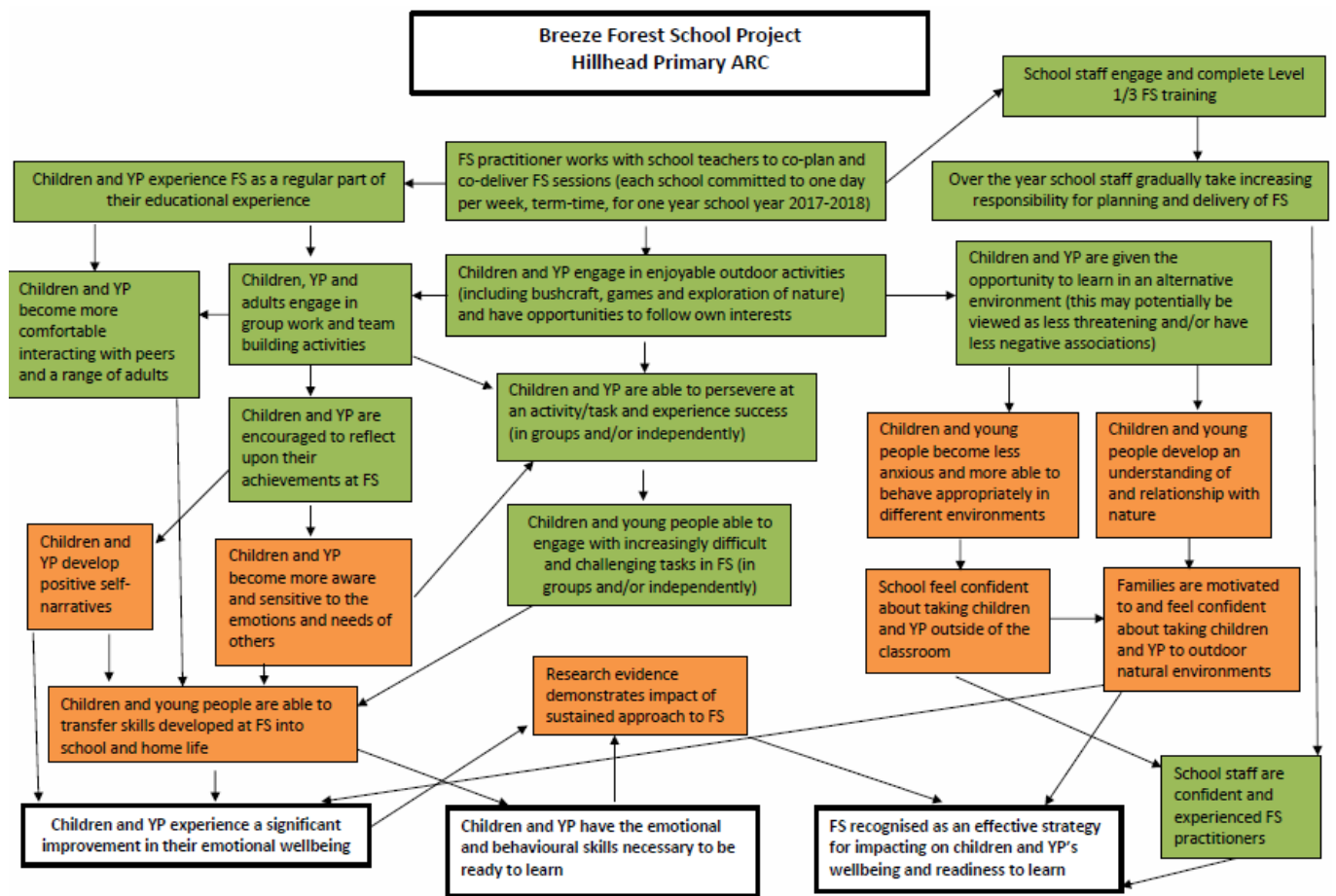
**BREEZE: IMPACTING ON YOUNG PEOPLE’S EMOTIONAL WELLBEING THROUGH FOREST SCHOOL**

**Appendix 1: Breeze steps of change**



**BREEZE: IMPACTING ON YOUNG PEOPLE’S EMOTIONAL WELLBEING THROUGH FOREST SCHOOL**

**Appendix 2: Hillhead steps of change progress September 2017 - June 2018**



Key:

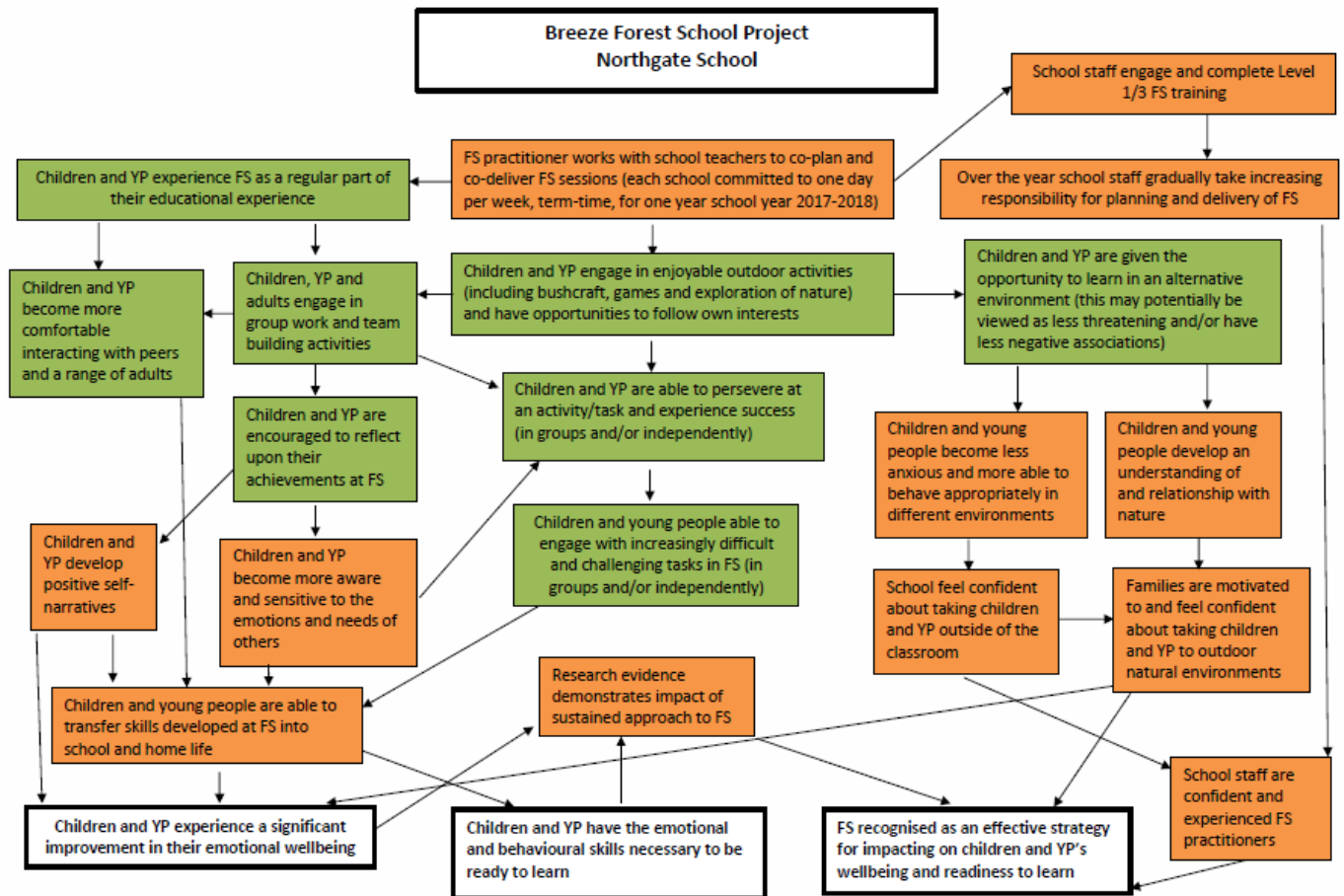
Evidence to support step of change =

Evidence to support step of change in some (but not all) cases at the time of assessment =

Evidence to refute step of change =

**BREEZE: IMPACTING ON YOUNG PEOPLE’S EMOTIONAL WELLBEING THROUGH FOREST SCHOOL**

**Appendix 3: Northgate steps of change progress September 2017 - June 2018**



Key:

Evidence to support step of change =

Evidence to support step of change in some (but not all) cases at the time of assessment =

Evidence to refute step of change =

## BREEZE: IMPACTING ON YOUNG PEOPLE'S EMOTIONAL WELLBEING THROUGH FOREST SCHOOL

### Appendix 4

Hillhead attendance data for five students September 2017-May 2018 (or until the young person left the school)

Student	Attendance as a % on non FS days	Attendance as a % at FS
1 (left Dec 2017)	88	81
2 (left Feb 2018)	94	95
3	89	90
4	90	98
5	92	100
<b>Group mean</b>	91	93

Hillhead recorded behavioural incidents of four students (Antecedent, Behaviour, Consequence method)

Student	Mean number of recorded behavioural incidents per non- FS session attended	Mean number of recorded behavioural incidents per session attended at FS
1	0.32	0.24
2	0.50	0.32
3	0.22	0.04
4	0.38	0.29
Group	0.36	0.22

Northgate student emotional literacy assessment

GL Assessment of Emotional Literacy – Student Questionnaire

Student	December 2017	June 2018
1	80	82
2	67	75
3	64	67
4	53	54
5	79	71
<b>Group mean</b>	69	70

Scores are out of 100 with the following scoring system:

61 or below: well below average

62-66: below average

67-78: average

79-83: above average

84 or above: well above average



## **For further information about the research**

Email: [Lucy.Tiplady@ncl.ac.uk](mailto:Lucy.Tiplady@ncl.ac.uk)



Lucy Tiplady is a Research Associate within the Research Centre for Learning and Teaching (CfLaT), Newcastle University. Lucy has worked on a diverse range of projects and evaluations within Education and developed subject specialisms in the areas of outdoor learning, practitioner enquiry and visual research methods. Working collaboratively with schools and the wider education community has led to an interest in how research methods can be used as tools for enquiry to aid teacher and student learning and how visual methods can be used to mediate and enhance interviews.

## **For further information about The Breeze Project**

Email: [harriet@sncg.org.uk](mailto:harriet@sncg.org.uk)



Harriet Menter - Having escaped a desk job, Harriet spends a lot of her working life "playing out". Since 2007 she has been Education Manager at Scotswood Garden, a community garden in an economically deprived area of Newcastle upon Tyne. She manages a programme of environmental education, forest schools and forest school training. She is particularly interested in using forest school as a way of working with those children and young people who struggle most in our education system. She is an Accredited Practitioner of the Institute for Outdoor Learning. She is at her happiest when tending a fire.



Research Centre for Learning and Teaching  
School of Education, Communication and Language Sciences  
Room 2.50  
King George VI Building  
Queen Victoria Road  
Newcastle University  
Newcastle upon Tyne  
NE1 7RU

ENGLAND

[www.ncl.ac.uk/cflat](http://www.ncl.ac.uk/cflat)

 @cflat4change