



MAKING IT HAPPEN GROW GRANT REVIEW

**BEXHILL FAMILY COLLECTIVE CIC COMMUNITY
FOREST SCHOOL**

Authored by: Heather Winchester June 2023



Forest school for all

A review of the last year where we have supported the growth of our Nurseries Forest School alongside a “free for all” community forest school designed for families with children aged under 5 years.

Our objectives of this project were to:

- Provide outdoor, forest school learning for all children without a premium or additional price attached, to bridge the gap between the most and least fortunate in our society.
- Enhance and build a stronger community by teaching families how to love and care for their outdoor spaces. We hoped that by teaching these skills to children they will grow to respect and care for their community.
- Ensure that families have a say in what activities are needed to support their mental health and give opportunities for mindfulness.

We received £14,400 from the Making it happen grow grant to deliver this work.

A massive thank you to Making it Happen and Rother Voluntary action. You helped us make this idea come true and in turn lots of families very happy!

What we hoped to achieve.

Our aim was to enhance and build a stronger community by teaching families how to love and care for their outdoor spaces. We hoped that by teaching these skills to children they will grow to respect and care for their community. We also planned to arm families with low cost/no cost activities to educate and entertain their children on a low budget. We hoped to support families to work towards a series of awards to build confidence and give a sense of achievement.

We considered that supporting parents and others in the local community to volunteer and build vital skills was an important part of this project which would enable them to find a job in future. We also wanted to ensure that every child who attended our community nursery had the opportunity to see all 4 seasons in the woods before going to school.





How we hoped to achieve it.

We aimed to run two community forest schools a week being led by a level 3 qualified Forest school practitioner.

We aimed for the forest school sessions to encourage families to work towards an award. We planned to hold periodic celebration events to mark these achievements. The awards were designed to be achievable, as we recognized that families attending the community forest school may have struggled to achieve at school and we aim to rekindle the sense of achievement that they have been missing. In turn we hoped to build families' self-confidence.

We planned to recruit and train volunteers to support our projects. This would be the first time we had used volunteers to run projects.

What we did

We devised a plan which enabled us to take every child from our community nursery, during the year before going to school, to the forest school at least once a week

We recruited volunteers and started one volunteer on level 2 Forest school training.

We provided Level 3 Forest School Leader training for one of our employed members of staff.

We employed one person who joined us on the kickstart team as a sessional member of staff to support the Forest School.

We started running 2 community forest school sessions a week on a Tuesday during term time. These sessions were planned for children to have the following experiences in each session:

- Free, unplanned time in nature
- Fire lighting and whittling
- Planned activities around a story e.g. making stick mobiles after reading “The Stick man”
- Planned activities to support families to gain an outdoor award e.g., making a hedgehog house for the Sussex Wildlife Trusts hedgehog awards.

We listened to what families were telling us, and we heard that parents were concerned about being able to offer healthy food to their families and were interested in learning to grow their own fruit and vegetables. As this was not something we were able to do within the woods, we partnered with a local allotment to turn one of the Community Forest School sessions into an “Allotment afternoon”.



What went well?

The community forest school has been extremely popular, and the staff at our community nursery have been proactive in engaging hard to reach families to attend the group too. This gives the opportunity for families to spend time outdoors, being physically active and learning new skills.

My child enjoys playing in the woods and learning new things such as building a fire and outdoor crafts. I feel more confident to do these things too.

One volunteer has now completed their forest school training. This experience has made us feel more confident in recruiting and supporting volunteers within our organization. We now have 6 volunteers who work across our projects.

The Making it happen grow grant gave us flexibility to change our original plan which supported us to provide allotment sessions as well as the community forest school sessions.

We became more confident in asking for voluntary donations. Families can now donate to us using PayPal and we encourage this rather than some families giving cash in the sessions and others feeling awkward that they are unable to.

I feel less isolated – meeting other parents every week and knowing you are meeting with others every session.



Families have worked to achieve 2 awards so far with us. The Sussex Wildlife trust hedgehog award and the Queen's Green Canopy award. Feedback has been really positive

I have seen a huge positive impact on my mental health. We now regularly participate in outdoor activities and have really connected to nature.

What were the unexpected outcomes?

As our confidence grew with the Community forest school sessions we felt confident to respond to requests from parents to run sessions during the school holidays. These sessions are also free and very well attended. Children benefit from free, uninterrupted play in the woods overlooked by parents and skilled practitioners. Children are always excited to come back and bad weather never fazes them!



I have made new friends over the weeks with other parents and my son has too. We always look forward to coming to forest school and thoroughly enjoy the sessions.

I started volunteering at the Community Forest School which has led onto more opportunities with me. I now volunteer for other community groups too.

What were the challenges

Our main challenge was the weather! The Winter of 2022/23 has been exceptionally wet which has made getting into the woods very difficult. However, we were determined to keep holding the sessions and giving children the experience of all the seasons, so we adapted the woodland space we used, and on exceptionally wet days we moved the session to a local field. We did have to cancel the session on 5 occasions due to exceptionally high winds.

For our nursery children, we found that once some children were in the setting, they were reluctant to leave, and some children were adverse to being in cold/wet weather. We came up with a range of strategies to get these children involved including parents meeting us at the woods rather than at nursery or taking the children's favourite activities with us.

One of the unforeseen challenges was parents' expectations of the sessions. We provided a number of activities throughout the session, but one fundamental experience we wanted the children and adult to have was free, uninterrupted playtime in nature. We found so many families conditioned to "what now" "what shall we do next" that this took a while for us to unpick and model to the families. Families reported that after a few weeks they could see how their children became involved in play with limited encouragement, adult direction, and resources.

It has made me more confident and prepared to go on outdoor adventures with my children.

What next?

We love what we do and feel the sessions have not only been a huge success but have given us confidence to react to our community's needs. We have recently been made

aware of a piece of allotment land that is being unused and we are working with Bexhill Town Council to lease this land and turn it into a community garden where we can hold projects in a safe space. This will also meet the needs of our current groups and give us alternatives in all weather conditions.

We will continue running the community forest school and allotment afternoon sessions.

My child and I both benefit from the group, socialising and learning.

We aim to recruit and support more volunteers to be part of our outdoor learning provision.

A final word

As a company relatively new to running projects on this scale, we were delighted to receive the funding from the Making it happen Grow Grant. We have been inspired by the faith put in us to not only run this project but to evolve the project to help many more people access the outdoors and learn how to “be” with their children. The beautiful conversations and relationships we have witnessed throughout this project cannot be translated into an impact report but they happen all the time. The richness in children’s play and vocabulary has grown considerably since the start of this project and the children comment upon how the environment is kept and are keen to clean up after themselves.

So, a “big thank you” to all at Making it Happen and Rother Voluntary Action. It could not have been possible without you!