

Our Vision for Forest School in Ireland 2023

The main object for which the Irish Forest School Association was established is the advancement of education through the promotion of Forest School. We provide information, events and advocacy about Forest School across Ireland.

Forest School will foster Ireland's unique culture and heritage

All countries have their own unique history, heritage and culture. Since Forest School (FS) is still relatively new educational approach in Ireland, we tend to adopt practices from other countries. Going forward, IFSA members highlighted that we must embrace the uniqueness of our culture and use it to shape our approach to FS. Key points included:

- Embrace unique culture & heritage of Ireland and its population
- Irish language, Ogham, Brehon Law all have their place in FS in Ireland
- Place-names are important and offer a connection to place/a sense of place
- Ireland's tradition of storytelling and folklore should be central
- Ireland's native plant and animal species
- Ensure Irish-specific context in FS practice (but considerate of various cultures of participants)
- Create culture of being outdoors and breaking weather/climate barriers
- Cultural challenge of perceived risk, develop safe risk taking

Forest School promotes a strong sense of connection to the natural world

Forest School pedagogy takes place in a woodland or natural environment to support development of a relationship between the participant and the natural world. By creating a strong sense of connection to the natural world, we can work to ensure the sustainability of the environment for future generations. IFSA members outlined the ways in which FS can contribute to this:

- Respect, responsibility & stewardship for and towards the natural world
- Knowledge about natural world
- Awaken curiosity
- Fosters nature (re)connection, gratitude
- Soul of environmental education
- Use of all senses, holistic
- Harmonious, valued relationship amongst natural world
- Changing attitudes to 'Irish weather' and being outdoors
- Access to natural spaces
- Land Accessibility: % forest cover, challenge of commercial forestry and landowners
- Need for sustainable woodland management plans, reforestation with native species

Forest School promotes Irish-specific training and standards

While we can and should learn from best-practice amongst our international peers, we should not rely solely on their training models and standards. IFSA members offered the following key points regarding training for those delivering FS here:

- Small, connected network of practitioners in Ireland
- Collaborative, non-competitive network
- Need Irish-specific standards, training/accreditation (via. QQI), regulation for FS
- Distinction between 'Forest School' & forest-based activities (same group, long process etc.).
- Transfer of skills, knowledge - frequent, nationwide CPD events essential
- Worthwhile to establish and contribute to Irish-specific evidence-based research and data to inform practice and funding applications
- Lack of funding streams for FS support - Create avenue for steady funding
- Not embedded in formal education system, need to document curriculum links
- Trainee teachers offered FS training, embedded in teacher-training curriculum
- Regular FS practice, following Six Principles
- Build IFSA brand, identity, guidelines on use of same
- Lobbying, connections with stakeholders such as Coillte, Dept. of Education, Insurance (group insurance scheme)
- A vision that FS is the 'norm'

This view has informed the new QQI Level 6 Forest School Leadership training , first delivered in 2022.

Forest School promotes Inclusivity for all

Inclusivity is central to IFSA members. This links with the Six Principles of FS and feedback highlights the benefits of FS for all involved:

- Inclusive, access to FS for all (age, gender, ethnicity, societal class etc.)
- FS for all, young and older, children to adults
- Reverses individuality
- Participant-led
- Resilience development
- Build life skills e.g. confidence, resilience, empowerment, independence, motor skills
- Freedom in a safe space
- Addresses many societal problems
- Personal journey of discovery
- Resilience building
- Individuality is respected and encouraged

This is a living document, updated regularly following our Annual Gatherings.