Planning Statement

for a Forest School Nursery on land at

Coombes Valley RSPB Reserve, Six Oaks Farm, Bradnop, Leek, Staffordshire, ST13 7EU

Re-Submission

Debbie Wood

[redacted]

Proposed Forest School Nursery on land at Coombes Valley RSPB Reserve

Summary

This statement has been prepared by D Wood and [redacted] to accompany a planning application for an Outdoor Nursery on land at Coombes Valley RSPB Reserve, Six Oak Farms, Bradnop, Leek, Staffordshire, ST13 7EU.

This is a re-application following an initial application in December 2019 upon which the Environmental Health consultee expressed some concerns. We have taken advice from a number of consultants to address those concerns including an NHS nurse, Fire and Rescue officer, teachers and Environmental Health Practitioner as well as considering how similar businesses operate in other areas.

The attached risk assessment and policy documents, listed below, provide further information on how our operating processes and practice will mitigate and control the issues causing the earlier concerns.

- Clothing
- Daily Check List
- Emergency Procedure for child and adult
- Environmental Impact and Conservation
- Equal Opportunities
- Food Handling and Preparation
- Induction and Admissions
- Infectious Diseases and Sick Children
- Safe Use of Fires
- Safeguarding Children and Child Protection
- Safer Food Better Business For Caterers
- Severe Weather
- SFBB Diary
- Summary Report of Forest School articles
- Toileting and Hygiene

The site and its surrounding

The land is owned by the RSPB and this application is made with the Society's awareness and full support.

The site is 0.1 hectares of unused land of low biodiversity value, comprising bare ground and common "weeds". Recently, the RSPB has cleared the site of brambles and seeded the area with grass. It is enclosed on three sides by a dry stone wall and we propose to secure the NE side with post and rail fencing to create a continuous secure boundary. There are a number of trees around the perimeter of the field namely birch, oak and hawthorn which will remain and be subject to periodic risk assessment particularly in relation to low level impact hazards.

The land generally slopes towards the SE boundary. There is also a slope towards the SW wall and a large dip half way along the NW wall.

The site is accessed via the car park located directly north, beyond which is the visitors' reception centre, reserve management office and accommodation for RSPB volunteers. A hardcore footpath runs the length of the NW site boundary. There are brambles running alongside the path that are enclosed with a dry stone wall which marks the edge of the reserve. Beyond the wall is a public road (Apesford Lane) and Ballfields Farm opposite.

To the SW is a grassed area with fenced-in pond, craft barn and a yurt. These structures are used for school visits and other activities run by the RSPB and can be hired by the general public.

Beyond the SE wall is an area of trees and scrub. There is a picnic area to the NE. Directly east is a footpath which gives access to the rest of the reserve from the visitors centre and is open to a large meadow.

Further S is woodland in which a Play Trail has been constructed which is used by RSPB visitors. Beyond the fairly flat Play Trail is the rest of the reserve. This is a large expanse of woodland with steep slopes to the valley floor with a river. There are a number of open fields or meadows which are used for grazing.

Recent photographs of the site as existing are provided at Appendix 1.

Description of the proposal

We propose to open a children's nursery which conducts much of its care and learning activities outdoors following a model established by a number of existing 'forest schools'. This will be an Ofsted-registered childcare setting open from 08:00 to 17:30 Monday to Friday all year round.

The children will be able to choose to spend much of their time outdoors with structures appropriate to the setting providing shelter, warmth etc when this is required. This is a proven concept with similar businesses operating in other areas, which we have subjected to a successful short pilot at the site in accordance with our childminding registration.

The families who participated are excited and keen for their children to start at the proposed nursery and from word of mouth recommendations we have been inundated with additional enquiries for childcare places which we can only accommodate through the venture proposed. Our own market and desktop research also show unmet demand for childcare places in the local area.

At the proposed nursery, children will be dropped off by their carers between 08:00 and 09:00 and collected between 15:00 and 17:30 using the existing RSPB car park during these times. Up to four cars for staff will be kept in the car park throughout the day. Currently the children we child mind are transported by car and dropped off at 42 Fairview Road, ST13 5BY in Leek at similar times. Via a client survey, we have established that this mode of transport would continue to be used at the proposed nursery hence, while not reducing air pollution from vehicles, our proposal does at least reduce the urban pollution our customers create, and acts to mitigate its harmful effects.

The nursery will initially have 15 places for children aged 2-5 years, staffed by up to four qualified and approved adults. We will accept the 30 hours funded childcare places as well as offering Think 2 places. As well as creating childcare places for local families, we believe the Forest School ethos will improve the mental health, self-confidence and independence of the children which will, in turn, improve school readiness and academic attainment throughout their school career and beyond. The children will spend much of their time outdoors which will help to promote healthy lifestyles and combat childhood obesity.

To create the nursery, a number of structures will be erected on site. A canvas bell tent will provide warmth in the winter via an externally vented solid fuel stove. We will create a cosy environment with blankets and cushions and give the children open access to storybooks and props.

A wooden summerhouse with timed electric heating will provide a warm space for the children to use from the moment they arrive onsite in the morning, and give them access to arts and craft materials, and other learning opportunities. We will assess the warmth of the summerhouse once built and add extra insulation if required. It will be lit by electric lighting to ensure the space is safe and usable during darker months.

A ridge tent will also provide shelter and another indoor activity space.

A shed-like structure suitably heated, lit, and compartmentalised for privacy, will house a camping toilet, baby changing table and hand washing facilities. The children and staff will mainly use the existing toilet facilities at the Visitors Centre with the camping toilet onsite for occasional use.

A kitchen preparation area will be created and used to prepare snacks and a basic evening meal, wash-up and store kitchen equipment. While designed to be 'outdoor' it will be protected from the elements by a canopy. Potable water will be available from a stand pipe in the west corner which to limit unnecessary access to the kitchen area. Water will be piped underground to the taps in the kitchen area, suitably protected from frost etc. We estimate we will use around 60 litres of water a day, grey water from the kitchen and stand pipe will be collected and disposed of in the existing drains at the visitors centre. Any hot food will be cooked on an open fire and served in a seating area with wooden picnic benches with a canopy above. Food preparation and cooking activities will be educational and areas for the kitchen will be designed to promote these activities.

We plan to site a chemical toilet disposal unit over an existing manhole cover near the visitors centre to aid disposal of grey water and emptying the camping toilet cassette. The access will be gated and not accessible to the general public. This is not including in the planning application as it does not require permission.

Four 50-watt LED outdoor floodlights will light the nursery area during darker hours in the winter months. The first will be mounted on the fence next to the gate to the site on a wooden pole around 7 feet high. The second will be sited on the roof of the Summerhouse lighting the area in front of the Ridge Tent. The third will be located on the front of the Toilet Shed providing light to the toilet and Fire Circle area. The final light will be mounted onto a tree trunk ensuring not to damage the bark. It will be around 8 feet high and will face the Outdoor Kitchen Area. All lights will be positioned to ensure they do not cause a nuisance to neighbouring properties or passing traffic. They will be timed to come on before staff arrive at 07:30am each morning to enable them to risk assess and set up the site ready for the children arriving at 08:00. They will switch off at 18:00 each evening allowing staff enough time to clear the site and lock up after the day. The lights will not be used during daylight hours or lighter months. If, when the site is built, these lights are not deemed sufficient, additional, solar-powered lights will be fitted to address any darker areas of the site. These will be low-level to not disturb any neighbours or roads and will be switched off over-night.

Occasionally, the children will be taken on trips to explore the main reserve. These trips and activities are included in our risk assessment attached.

Appraisal of relevant planning issues

Nature conservation: the enclosed letter from the RSPB confirms that the land is of low intrinsic value for nature. The proposed use is entirely self-contained and will have no off-site impacts on the nearby Combes Valley Site of Special Scientific Interest. There are no features on site liable to hold specially protected species. No trees are proposed to be removed.

Landscape and visual impacts: the tents, summerhouse and other structures proposed to be located on the site are all small scale and will scarcely be visible beyond the boundaries of the site itself. Because of screening trees and drystone walls, no element of the proposal will be visible from the only residential property in the immediate area, Ballfields Barn, located on the west side of Apesford Lane approximately 60m away. Any lighting will be switched off between the hours of 18:00 to 07:30 and will be directed away from the road and neighbours.

Access statement

The proposed use will be served by the existing RSPB car park and visitor trail, which provides level access onto the site suitable for people of all levels of mobility. As with any childcare facility, access to the site itself during operational hours is restricted to authorised childcare providers, children, and their carers. A new fence with a single gate, less than 2m high and not adjacent to a public highway, will be sited along the currently open NW boundary of the site to ensure the children's security and welfare. We believe this fence does not require planning permission and it is not included in this application.

The RSPB will provide an alternative visitor trail route that avoids the site completely, enabling visitors to reach the field teaching shelter and yurt from the car park.

No public rights of way are affected.

Appendix 1 - photographs of the site as existing, July 2019













Appendix 2 - photographs of the structures proposed to be located on the site



Bell tent - proposed to be located near the E boundary



Ridge tent - proposed to be located on the NW boundary





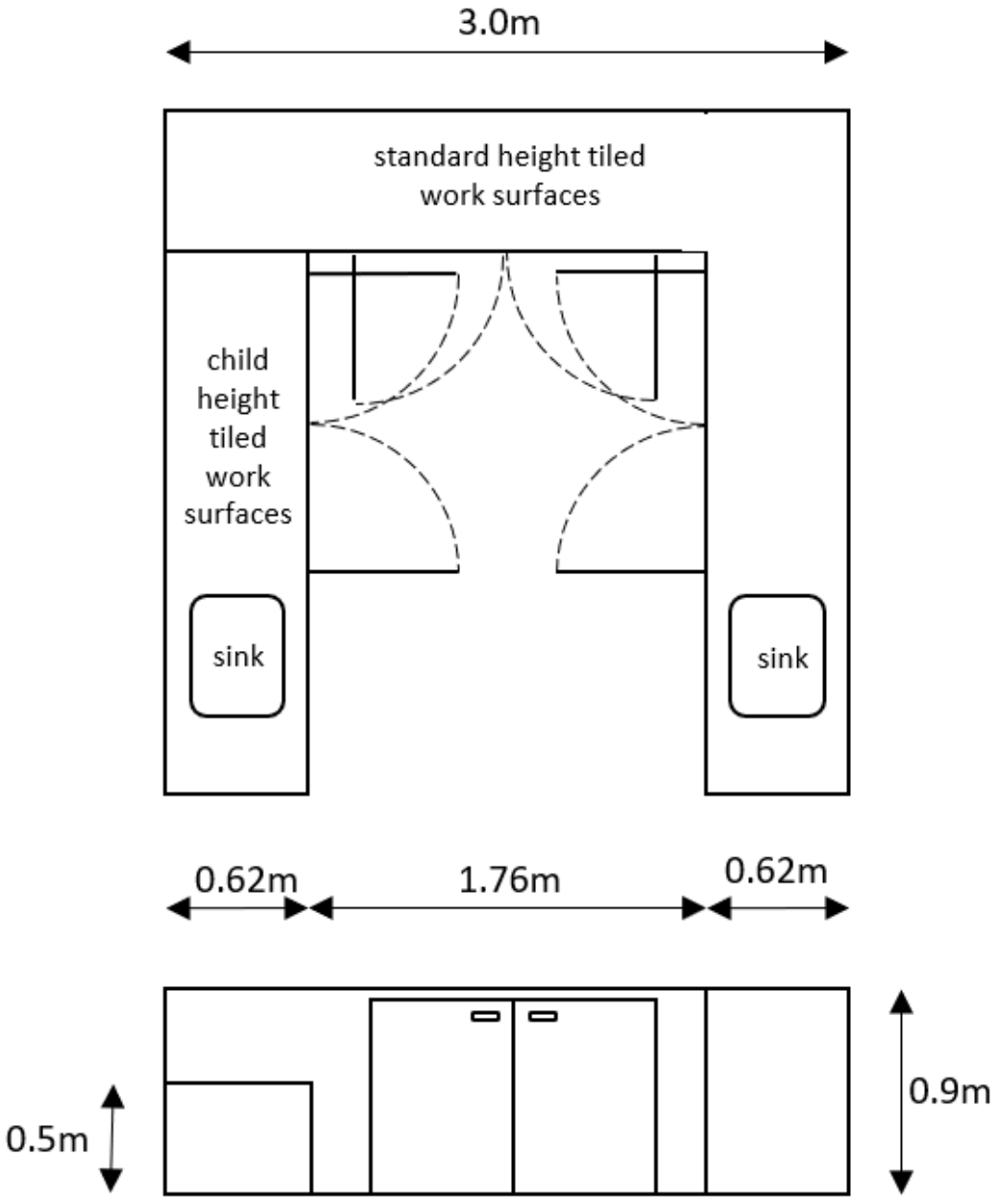
Two views of the style of summerhouse/lockable storage proposed to be located on the western boundary.



Shed to house camping toilet, proposed to be located close to the summerhouse on the SW boundary.

Appendix 3 - scale drawing of proposed outdoor kitchen

To be built from breeze blocks, painted, with tiled work surfaces at standard adult height (0.9m) and (in part) reduced height for children.



Appendix 4 – Letter of support from Laura Heath

My name is Laura Heath and my husband Stephen and I moved to Leek a month before our daughter Iris was born in September 2016. Stephen works in Bucknall as a Special Needs Teacher and Curriculum Manager at a College. I am a youth and community worker, holistic therapist and community yoga teacher working in Schools and community centres in Leek. Since moving to Leek we have been continually thrilled by the town and what it has to offer.

Before our daughter Iris was born we both agreed we would love her to attend a forest school/nursery as we both value the health benefits of the outdoors greatly, Stephen is a post Graduate in Environmental sustainability and I had the privilege of growing up rurally roaming the fields and countryside throughout my childhood.

Whilst I was still pregnant with Iris I visited a Forest Nursery in a rural area on the outskirts of Ashbourne where we lived prior to Leek, a great resource. We have also had numerous visits to Congleton Forest School a thriving Forest School nursery with satellite projects popping up to accommodate the needs of its community. We have also looked at the Forest School opportunities in Hull as I am from East Yorkshire, the Forest Nursery is on the outskirts of Hull is in Beverley and a drop in one at the Country Park. My point is that these successful projects are often on the fringe of a town but are of great benefit to the children and families in the area.

We feel Flying High will be a massive asset for the town demonstrating a progressive outlook in education and the future of our planet and our children.

As Staffordshire moorlands has declared a Climate Emergency it is vital that we must offer opportunities to educate our children and young people in the value and diversity of our planet. It would be a very sad to not offer this opportunity to just some of the children of Leek. Even if this first class provision was in Leek (the only place that springs to mind is the waste which is next to an very bust A road so I would not be happy about my daughter playing there everyday) it would still only be available to a regulated number of children at any one time.

The facilities on offer at Coombes valley are so valuable to our wonderful town and with the establishment of a forest nursery there opens up other opportunities for the children, young people and their families.

It will also enable children who live in Leek the opportunity to explore their countryside which those who live in the higher priced housing more rural have, therefore increasing equal opportunities.

I envisage Flying High could evolve in to a very beneficial satellite resource for our family focused town striving to keep local opportunities and business for local people, I am super proud to be a resident of Leek and the strong community ethic and innovative approach it holds. As a qualified youth and community I believe community and bringing people together is vital to good physical, emotional and mental health and we all know the major health benefits of being out in nature! And we have an abundance of awe inspiring nature around Leek. The children of leek need to access this.

Again, with regards to the fact that Staffordshire Moorlands council have declared a Climate Emergency what a pioneering idea it would be to arrange a eco transport system for the children and families to access our countryside, learn from and maintain our surroundings as science shows things are well going to be changing with regards to out natural world in our children lifetimes.

If there is anything I can do to support Flying High Forest Nursery moving forward and using the perfectly fit for purpose site that they have already trialed with our children I will be happy to help.

Kind Regards, Laura, Stephen and Iris Heath-Catchick.

Appendix 5 – Letter of support from Emily Golding

Not only do I have the privilege of Debbie Wood being my next door neighbour and getting to see how well she interacts with children in her own home, I get to see the excitement on children's and parents faces when they are dropped off in a morning to prepare to go to Forest School. I am so passionate about this school continuing to grow and develop I felt it was crucial to put across my views not only as a neighbour, but also as a professional.

As a mental health nurse who specialises in trauma informed care, I regularly look into the past and childhood of patients. Patients who struggle with confidence, self-esteem, depression and lack of motivation tends to stem from any childhood events.

Over the past twenty years, the early years and childhood of children has changed significantly. Children are fixated on computers and internet devices, their confidence and ability to interacts well with others is hindered due to constantly being indoors. Children are no longer taking appropriate risks, learning about risk or developing their motor skills by moving around and being curious. Quality face to face time with caregivers is vital and allows children to learn verbal and non-verbal interaction.

The World Health Organization recommends that there should be no screen time for children under the age of three and screen time of only one hour for children between ages three and four (WHO, 2019) and although short snippets of screen time is invaluable, forest school allows children an opportunity to learn skills in an alternative way.

Forest school allows learners to achieve and develop confidence and self-esteem which are invaluable skills which will progress future development. It is a world filled with discovery and difference, bringing individuals back into touch with the natural world. Forest school helps to promote development, fosters resilience, independence and creativity. It allows a child to take ownership of their learning and apply learning learnt inside their home, regular nursery or school to a real life situation outside the classroom.

There is a range of evidence and a number of studies that have been completed which highlight the positive impact that forest school can have on individuals and can help to prevent mental health problems and social issues later in life. I have seen first hand children that have grown in confidence, intuition and independence, just from them returning from Debbie's forest school to her home over an 8 week period and it is fantastic to witness.

Flying High Outdoor Nursery is invaluable and an absolutely fantastic project which deserves all the support it can gain to help grow, develop and expand. It would be tragic if a school with such passion and commitment was hindered and unable to develop to help more and more children grow.

Kind regards,

Emily Goulding

Appendix 5 – Letter of support from Lucy Barton

To whom it may concern.

I believe the values and ethos of a Forest School education are second to none.

Having the opportunity to embrace the outdoors and truly value the external environment is an experience that every child should be able to benefit from.

At present there is no full time Forest School available for the children of the Staffordshire Moorlands and I wholly support this application.

My daughter has thrived during her time at Twinkle Stars Childminding with Debbie, she has gained an appreciation for the value of nature and the benefits on an outdoor education. She is respectful of both those around her and the wildlife, flora and fauna.

Particularly with environmental sustainability being raised on the international stage, it is vital that future generations understand the real importance of protecting and working in harmony with our natural surroundings.

My daughter is now inquisitive, independent in her learning and extremely creative and has learnt things that she never would have within the confines of a traditional nursery setting.

I know that the applicants for this proposal have undertaken extensive research and training and would deliver a Forest School Experience that is highly beneficial to both the children in their care and the wider community through educating our children to be better people.

Yours faithfully

Lucy Barton

Head of Economics and Business, Newcastle under Lyme School.

Home address - 8 Hugo Street, Leek.