outdoor nurseries are on the rise across the UK. This year alone, five have opened in London, with another five opening in Scotland, including the third in a social enterprise ‘chain’ of outdoor settings, called Stramash.

Also known as forest kindergartens, nature nurseries or forest pre-schools, no two outdoor nurseries are the same. Some have buildings, others have shelters. Some are semi-nomadic, such as two of the well-established outdoor nurseries like The Secret Garden Outdoor Nursery in Fife and the Woodlands Outdoor Kindergartens in Glasgow, while others stay largely on-site, such as Little Explorers at Highway Farm in Cornwall.

What all have in common is their focus on learning outdoors and the fact that children spend the bulk of their time there – 90 per cent of the day all year round as a rule of thumb.

Forest school, by contrast, is a specific approach to outdoor learning that usually takes place as a series of weekly or fortnightly sessions over a period of time, such as a term. The lead person is also required to have a Level 3 forest school qualification, whereas normal statutory rules apply when it comes to ratios and qualifications.

**Growing Popularity**

Juliet Robertson, an early years consultant specialising in outdoor learning and founder of Creative STAR Learning Company, has been tracking the growing popularity of these outdoor settings.

Based in Inverurie, Aberdeenshire, Ms Robertson says, ‘It’s an exciting time to be in early years education. Outdoor nurseries are not only on the rise – they are here to stay. The evidence of their effectiveness is not just born out of research, but can be...’
seen when visiting a well-run establishment and how engaged and motivated children are. I think it’s the dawn of a new way of educating, which is not just environmentally sustainable but about ensuring children have a healthier and more holistic start to formal education.

She has been struck by the varied backgrounds of the founders of some settings. As examples, she says, ‘Cathy Bache, who runs The Secret Garden in Fife, was originally a drama teacher. Woodlands Outdoor Nursery in Glasgow was set up by a physiotherapist parent. Stramash and Nursery in Glasgow was set up by a teacher. Woodlands Outdoor Garden in Fife, was originally a drama start to formal education.

‘Because no two outdoor nurseries are the same, the evolution seems to be context-specific and meeting the needs of the children at each nursery,’ continues Ms Robertson.

‘I also think the outdoor learning is becoming more focused. By this, I mean it’s not all about toasting marshmallows and playing with sticks and getting muddy. Outdoor nurseries have moved beyond this sort of stereotype into purposeful active, creative learning establishments.

‘For example, this summer, three Swedish trainers, including Siw Linde – who founded the first outdoor “Rain or Shine” nursery in Sweden, are offering training in Wales, England and Scotland based on the Skogsmulle approach, which uses a fantasy character to help children learn about and cherish nature.’

Practitioners are also spreading best practice by networking, particularly through Facebook, sharing ideas and providing informal support. For example, there is a Forest Kindergarten Teacher Network. But there is one grey cloud on the horizon. ‘The big concern,’ concludes Ms Robertson, ‘is whether primary schools are able to build on the positive start made by outdoor nurseries and the totality of this unique way of learning in the early years.’

**CASE STUDIES**

**LITTLE EXPLORERS OUTDOOR PRE-SCHOOL, REDRUTH, CORNWALL**

**Setting:** Private nursery, part of Highway Farm Activity Centre.

**Opened:** January 2011; activity centre started in April 2006.

**Size:** 0.6ha (1.5 acres) of field.

**Number of children:** Sixty on role; each day there are 12 three-year-olds in one timber classroom and 16 four-year-olds in another.

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**NATURE TO NURTURE, LIVERPOOL**

**Setting:** Private nursery.

**Size:** 2ha (5 acres).

**Opened:** September 2014.

**Number of children:** Sixteen on role.

**Time outdoors:** Seven hours a day for three days a week and three hours on Fridays.

**Ratios:** 1:5.

**Staff qualifications:** All have a Level 3 in childcare and forest school training.

Nature to Nurture is Merseyside’s first outdoor nursery, located in Croxteth Country Park in central Liverpool. Although the park is in an area of deprivation, the land itself houses a stately home, a farm, riding stables and a walled garden with allotments and a wide diversity of animal habitats.

Managing director Julie White says, ‘We are fortunate to be able to incorporate all of these experiences into the programmes we deliver, so that the children receive a learning experience like no other.

‘The company launched in 2012 and initially started with woodland birthday parties and family sessions and as we moved into 2013 we decided to introduce toddler programmes. They are designed to get families with young children out into the woodland and familiar with this type of environment.

‘Families are then able to see for themselves the difference in their children’s confidence and physical skills. We are completely outdoors with no building and our first winter has most definitely highlighted that there is no such thing as bad weather, just bad clothing.’

‘We set up the camp at 8.30am with washing facilities, shelters, a hammock and a tepee. Children undertake their own safety risk assessment of their play spaces with the staff. They look for broken glass, litter and dog poo and also check that the red and white tape – the boundary – is intact.

‘When we are off on walks around the park, they know to move to the side if there is a bike and to cross their arms and look down if there is a loose dog. Parents tell us this awareness of safety has also filtered into their everyday lives as they are always looking for dangers around them.

‘Having limited resources means that the children think more imaginatively and instead of parents having to entertain them, they are now able to think for themselves and play imaginatively with anything they find.

‘On windy days we take the children to museums or art galleries. Last week we watched a daddy longlegs emerge from the larvae. We filmed it and posted it on the online learning journeys. This is nature at its purest.’

Ms White has plans to extend the nursery to full-time provision and is looking to rent out a building on the site.

[www.naturetonurture.co.uk](http://www.naturetonurture.co.uk)
Opening times: 8am-6pm. Some children stay until 1pm, some until 3.30pm and some for after-school club, which finishes at 6pm.

Time outdoors: 90 per cent of the time, in all weathers.


Staff qualifications: Six staff; one qualified early years teacher; two qualified to Level 6 management childcare; and three to Level 3.

One thing that sums up the creativity and ingenuity of this outdoor nursery and activity centre is the way that the after-school children arrive at the setting. They cross a field behind their school, climb over the stile and slide down into the nursery field.

I entered the nursery via the slide, which was great fun, and the rest of the visit didn’t disappoint. This is a magical place, where I would have loved to have spent time as a child.

The site was once an empty, grass field, but now shrubs, willow and trees have been planted there, creating tunnels, hideaways and sheltered spaces where children can enjoy messy play in the mud kitchens or make dens in the construction area.

The first thing that struck me is how ‘real’ the place felt. There are nettles, gorse, brambles, real tools and some of the climbing equipment has been made by the children themselves, with wooden pallets.

First, I headed for the dedicated area for four- to five-year-olds, which is called Tevi, the Cornish word meaning ‘to grow’. On the way, I passed a group of children engrossed in water play and a Hobbit House, which the children decided to build in the hole where the old trampoline sat.

This is separated from the rest of the site with a gate, and here there is a mud kitchen, a builder’s yard, a sand and water area, a fairy and elf garden, a shed named The Bear Lair containing bark chips and marking materials, a woodland area with a treehouse, and a dinosaur land.

The spaces are cleverly zoned with a treehouse, and a dinosaur hidden in the two cosy, eco-friendly timber huts and they spend the rest of their days outdoors.

Daily, the children collect eggs from the hens, feed and care for the rabbits and tend to the herbs and plants in the growing area. There are also two sheds kitted out for arts and crafts and tool work.

Co-owner Martin Besford says, ‘There are covered areas within our outdoor space to provide shelter from the harsh summer or winter weather. There are sheds that are also open all the time and children often use the resources in them to enhance their role play. For example, if they are playing pirates, they might pop in to make a telescope and then take it outside to carry on with their play.’

The nursery has partnerships with schools in Iceland, America, Ireland and recently also in Lithuania, where it has helped support the first outdoor nursery in the country.

The nursery is part of Highway Farm Activity Centre, a private business but also a community interest company, which means that other groups, such as Cornwall’s Community Childminding Network, also access the nursery site. Mr Besford says, ‘This allows us to apply for funding from the council to buy growing beds, or the new campfire, and to improve the facilities for such groups.’

One thing that stands out at this setting is the staff’s confidence and experience in outdoor learning. Mr Besford says, ‘No one has a forest school qualification here because that is not what we offer. We run and promote outdoor learning. We deliver training and consultancy to other settings and schools in Cornwall, the UK and now internationally, promoting outdoor learning. The main area people need help with is the campfire element, developing their outdoor spaces and grounds and risk assessment.’

Highway Farm received an ‘outstanding’ from Ofsted in June 2015.

LITTLE FOREST FOLK, WIMBLEDON, SOUTH LONDON

Setting: Private nursery.

Opened: January 2015.

Size: 1.4ha (3.5 acres).

Number of children: Ninety-three children on roll, up to 30 a day, aged from two to five years.

Time outdoors: 90 per cent of the day.


Staff qualifications: Eight staff, all Level 3 early years qualified or to degree level; two Level 3 forest school leaders and two staff undergoing Level 3 forest school training.

One of London’s first outdoor nurseries offering full-time nursery education from 8am to 6pm, Little
Forest Folk is now planning a major expansion after winning the Big Venture Challenge, a National Lottery award.

Co-owner Leanna Barrett, a trained chef, opened the nursery because she couldn’t find any local outdoor nurseries for her own children. ‘We started with ten children and we now have 93 children on role,’ she explains. ‘We’re struggling to cope with enquiries, and they are all from word of mouth.’

Each morning, parents drop off their children at the Scout hall near Raynes Park train station, West Wimbledon, and they pick them up at the same place between 4pm and 6pm. The children then make their way to an area within the Fishpond Wood nature reserve at Wimbledon Common, which Little Forest Folk has leased from the council.

This area is fenced of and gated so that no one from the public can enter. Inside, there is a geometric dome in case of really bad weather. Some children also sleep in it. The frame of the dome is up at all times, but the canvass comes off each day.

Ms Barrett says, ‘We base the success of our nursery around our children and their families’ happiness. We encourage a sense of wonder, freedom and adventure in life and see our role as merely enhancing their play rather than dictating their learning. We are a child-led, play-based setting where laughter and giggles are the order of the day.

‘Our children are permanently active, whether it be running across a meadow, climbing a tree or wriggling under brambles. We love seeing the way their engagement in learning is improved by being permanently in motion. We want to spark their curiosity and encourage their creativity so that the children can learn to become self-motivated, confident, enthusiastic and independent little thinkers.

‘We want them to see the joy in nature and life and love to watch how engrossed they become in their fantasy play with sticks, leaves and stones. We want to teach children how to think, not what to think, and live by the Plutarch quote that “The mind is not a vessel to be filled, but a fire to be kindled”.

‘At the end of the day we are parents, keen to create an inspiring experience for our own and other children. We want them to have the childhood they deserve to have.’

Now, as a winner of the Big Venture Challenge, Little Forest Folk can look to expand its model of provision. An intensive 12-month programme, the challenge helps ambitious social entrepreneurs to raise between £50,000 and £500,000 by providing access to business support and potential investors.

‘The award has been invaluable to us,’ says Ms Barrett. ‘We are getting help in all aspects of the business. We have a venture manager, a marketing expert, are getting legal advice to help with lease agreements, and have ongoing mentoring.

‘There are ambitious plans to open a large number of outdoor nurseries across the country, including in primary schools.

‘However, for now, we are looking at opening two more in the South East by the end of next year. It took us a long time to get opened because we had no registered premises and we had no prior experience of running nurseries.’

Forest Kindergarten is now planning a major expansion after winning the Big Venture Challenge, a National Lottery award.

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became more and more obvious to me that the children wanted to be outside more than a few hours a week. So, I decided to take the forest school back to its roots in Scandina-

"...where children could be outdoors all day long, learning where they learn best: through nature, and play. 'In the past 18 months we have gone from five children to 30 and we are full for next year. It's amazing to see how much children learn and flourish when they are immersed in nature.

'They develop and learn creatively and naturally. We see what happens spontaneously and then review what's happened. We bring music-making by making our own drums and sticks; we do a lot of imaginary, explorative play, natural art, and construction around building dens and structures with logs and natural materials.

'We also go on long, wandering walks, exploring the fields, woodland and the farmland, meeting the community on our adventures.

'We incorporate areas of the curriculum like numeracy and language into everyday life, for example, counting at snack time; we make paint out of natural berries and dandelions, and children use the clay from the ground to make models.'

Ms Watts has been so inundated with requests about how to set up and run pre-schools that she is teaching a series of workshops on the subject, along with her colleague, the pre-school learning alliance. She has been teaching them the basics of outdoor learning, how to create a safe and stimulating environment for children, and how to integrate it into everyday teaching.

'The work with the pre-school learning alliance has been really rewarding. We've seen such positive changes in the children's attitudes and behaviour, and we've also gained a lot of confidence in our own abilities as educators. It's been a great experience for everyone involved.'

Ms Watts is now planning to expand her work with pre-schools, and she is looking to work with a wider range of settings, including nurseries and schools.

"...and both settings will move towards becoming full outdoor nurseries over the next year."

Setting: Managed by the Pre-School Learning Alliance.
Opened: April 2015.
Number of children: 24 per session.
Time outdoors: 95 per cent of the time.
Ratios: Five staff.
Staff qualifications: All Level 3 in childcare; one forest school Level 3 leader.

After 20 years on a school site, Cherry Blossom Pre-School has recently made the transition from ‘indoor’ nursery with a heavy focus on outdoor learning to an outdoor nursery in nearby Beckenham Place Park.

Val Pope, executive manager for Pre-School Learning Alliance Lewisham, explains, ‘The school wanted to expand so the council found us these premises, as it knew we wanted to focus on outdoor learning.’

The setting’s new parkland home is a ‘wonderful enclosed space’, fenced off, surrounded by mature trees and with a bespoke building set up as a nursery, with an office, kitchen and playrooms. ‘But we mainly use it to store our resources,’ says Ms Pope, ‘because the children choose to be outdoors all day. Outside, there’s a mud kitchen and a forest school site and it’s near the river.’

Parents’ commitment to outdoor play and a well-planned transition have meant that the majority of families have moved with the setting to its new premises. ‘The parents value outdoor education and have been extremely positive about the move,’ says Ms Pope. ‘It hasn’t been difficult to win over parents because we’ve always been outdoors a lot during the sessions. Now we’re just outside the whole day. ‘A lot of preparation has gone into the transition. Parents and children are able to access the site easily as it is near a car park and has lots of paths leading to the site. Children also spent a month attending stay-and-play sessions with their parents before attending the setting alone in May. Now parents can see the differences in their children – they are sleeping well, have better appetites and are calmer.’

But the transition continues. ‘Although we operate as an outdoor nursery and are outdoors 95 per cent of the time, we are not yet spending all day in the woodland,’ Ms Pope explains. ‘We consider this a stepping stone to becoming a fully-fledged outdoor nursery a year from now. We are working within the park to expand what we’re offering. Everyone – the parents, the staff and the children – is so enthusiastic about making this happen.’

For those looking to make the same transition, she advises, ‘If you have a bit of outdoor space, you could start with a small area and gradually expand it. We have had a lot of requests from nurseries over the next year.

The site is enclosed with a bespoke building on-hand work with settings across the borough to deliver outdoor learning. They are currently developing River School at the Cherry Blossom site. September will also see the opening of Camelot Pre-School in Lewisham, also focusing on outdoor learning, and both settings will move towards becoming full outdoor nurseries over the next year.

www.pre-school.org.uk/lewisham
up an outdoor nursery, the practicali-
ties involved and how to get Ofsted
on board that she has set up the For-
est Kindergarten Association (www.
forestkindergartenassociation.co.uk),
a website that aims to brings together
outdoor nurseries, share good prac-
tice and be the UK voice for forest
kindergartens.

She has also set up the Forest
School Kindergarten Discussion
Group on Facebook, which has more
than 500 members across the country
and abroad. Forest Kindergarten
received an ‘outstanding’ Ofsted
inspection in May 2014.

www.forest-kindergarten.co.uk

COWGATE UNDER 5S
CENTRE, EDINBURGH
Setting: A 57-place council-owned
nursery in central Edinburgh.
Size: 10.5ha (26 acre) wild site.
Opened: 2011.
Number of children: Up to 14
children access the site daily, arriving
at 10am and returning by 4pm. Chil-
dren from 18 months old can choose
to go.
Time outdoors: All day, 10am-
4pm.
Ratios: 1:5.
Staff qualifications: Three have
forest school, beach school and out-
door training.

Cowgate’s outdoor adventures started
with forest school sessions on a World
Heritage Site plot of land next to Edin-
burgh Castle and near the nursery,
after negotiating access with the Scot-
tish Wildlife Trust. The experiences
proved so enriching for the children
that the centre decided to set up an all-
day outdoor kindergarten.

Centre head Lynn McNair
explains: ‘The forest school site is a
wonderful plot of land and we still
use it, but the skills that our children
were coming back with were so rich
– and we knew they needed more
than six-week blocks of play. So, our
next move was to set up the dedicated
nature kindergarten, which is a
20-minute coach ride away on a site
facilitated by Scouts and City of Edin-
burgh Council. The children call it
Stickland and it has proved immen-
sely popular, with a waiting list of
300 and attracting visitors from
around the world.

‘Words cannot describe the joy that
our children get out of being able to
freely explore the site. There’s a
stream, a forest, an amphitheatre,
long wavy grass, a bank to climb up,
trees, an open fire pit for cooking,
der in the distance and a heated
Mongolian yurt, which we use to
regroup, store items or children can
access any time they want to rest. We
fight in all weathers, even high winds.
It’s a very spiritual place, for children
and practitioners.

‘Our whole philosophy is based
around the work of Froebel. He intro-
duced the term kindergarten and
believed everything can be taught
through nature. So, for example, the
children explore mathematical con-
cepts by putting sticks in the river to see
how deep it and if they can cross, and
there’s lots of writing in sand.

‘One of the main differences of
our nature kindergarten is that our

Cowgate uses a
free-flow approach
and has much
focus on sustaining
the environment
(above); North
London Forest
School provides
tools such as drills,
saws and magnifying
glasses for
exploration (below
and right)
North London Forest School is the first outdoor nursery to open in the borough of Camden. Owner Luana Munteanu, who has been running forest school sessions in north London for the past two years and has been a nursery teacher for ten, says that the demand from parents for outdoor learning has ‘rocketed’.

‘The borough has been very supportive and offered us a local site to use during term time. It’s a secure site that is only open to the public at weekends and they let us use a shed nearby to store some essential resources. We also have an indoor registered premises minutes from Hampstead Heath. Before we secured the outdoor site, we used the nursery as a base and spent most of the time in the local woodland. We also use it more during the winter months.

‘I think that the rise in outdoor nurseries in the capital has a lot to do with the health issues that inner-city children face. We offer the free entitlement and have a mixture of children coming from all backgrounds – from professional families to those who struggle financially.’

Each morning before the children arrive, the nursery staff clear the site of any hazards and set up an area with a tarpaulin, a picnic area, a tent where children can rest and a toilet tent. Resources such as a mud kitchen to engage children in imaginative play, spades, cameras, magnifying glasses, string, storybooks and factual books about wildlife and plants, tools, like drills and saws, are also provided. The area has a pond, which has tadpoles in spring – useful for learning about life-cycles, as are the birds when they lay their eggs, and the children often find chicks, dead or alive.

In the nature area, there are logs, trees, slopes to climb and slide on, and a sensory garden rich in wildlife. There are designated areas for specific activities – for example, a digging area, a climbing area and drumming area, a den-making area, a shrub tunnel, a small meadow where children can observe butterflies and an area where children can collect berries.

The children are free to move around the different areas accompanied by an adult. They are encouraged and reminded to ask an adult to accompany them on their ‘journeys’ around the nature reserve. The adults communicate with each other using walkie-talkies.

‘In terms of risk,’ explains Ms Munteanu, ‘we control the main hazards by removing dangerous objects like glass, and teach the children to be careful with nettles and spiky thorns and not to put things in their mouth.

‘There are cones around the pond and around the areas that they are not allowed to walk on, such as newly planted beds and wildlife habitats. All children wear high-visibility bibs and there is an emergency procedure where they go to the nearest member of staff if they hear the whistle.

‘We help them understand the concept of being safe, but at the same time develop their own inner feeling of how to keep safe. If they have bumps or falls they are comforted, encouraged and supported to become resilient. This environment fits in well with the characteristics of effective learning. It offers opportunities for the children to become active learners, to think for themselves, to develop initiative, to create games and play with what is available, and to develop close relationships.

In terms of keeping a record of the children’s development and plan from what we observe, we use iPhones to take photos of the children daily and we upload them to the online parents system to keep the parents informed about learning.’

Visit **www.nlforestschoolnursery.com/about-us/4585538573**

Visit **www.nurseryworld.co.uk** to see more case study images