

The Outdoor Project Evaluation

The Outdoor Project ran from December 2025 to March 2026 and engaged 28 Key Stage 4 students from three Pupil Referral Units in Croydon. The project was a collaboration between SVC, Tangled Feet, and Go Wild With Us CIC, and was specifically designed to support young people who are unable to access mainstream schools.

This project was rooted in direct recommendations from our youth advisory panel, made up entirely of former Pupils. They identified their biggest barriers to education and to staying away from risky street environments in Croydon as:

- The school environment itself, which felt restrictive and alienating
- Boredom and lack of purposeful activity
- Peer pressure in areas such as Church Street, where there were “no safe alternatives” to spend time

These young advisors had all experienced the benefits of creative therapy and strongly recommended that it should be made accessible to all PRU students. They also emphasised that sessions should ideally take place outdoors, away from the confines of school buildings and youth centres, which they felt were “not fit for purpose”. Further recommendation was for dedicated spaces for discussion, debate, and togetherness—spaces without pressure or expectation—where young people could reflect on themselves, their relationships, and their place in the world.



Aims and Objectives:

What it is:

- Freedom
- Choice and Agency (moving choice into action)
- Self-led
- An act of belonging (to nature, to the group, to school)
- A pause
- Balance (holding two opposing things at the same time)

What it isn't:

- Competition (no outdoor competitive activities)
- Not adrenaline fuelled, but Oxytocin generating
- It's not school (we are not teaching)
- It's not Therapy (even though it might feel therapeutic)

What it might achieve:

- Insight into how you feel your emotions
- Self-discovered tools to regulate emotions
- A container in which to place those emotions (nature)
- Build connection between people
- Build connection with the natural world (as a resource)
- Build self-confidence and a stronger sense of self
- Promote metallization (ability to think and feel alongside another)
- Find a sense of my place in the natural world and how I can support

Activities

Forest bathing
Forest sleeping
Painting
Sawing



Fire building
Open fire cooking
Wood chopping
Fire side sharing



Hiking
Singing

Image capturing (Taking into life)

Bird feeder making

Meditating

Swinging

Earth Cries



Jumping in muddy puddles

Story telling

Talking around the camp fire

Drinking a lot of hot chocolate

Toasting a lot of marshmallows





Facilitator observations and summary:

Four groups of young people were welcomed to Heartwood, a woodland space intentionally shaped around community and connection. Each group visited the site for three consecutive weeks across December, January, February, and March. On arrival, young people were provided with warm, protective outdoor clothing to ensure they could participate comfortably in all weathers.

They were selected by their Heads of Provision, who felt they would benefit from time in nature and the therapeutic qualities of the woodland environment. There were no strict referral criteria—just a shared sense that these young people might thrive with space, fresh air, and gentle support.

One of the most striking outcomes was the increase in confidence among participants. One example stands out: a very quiet, reserved young person who, by week two, walked straight up the hill and independently built the campfire that became the heart of the group. It was a moment of genuine transformation — we met a new version of her that day. This confidence continued back in school, which staff also noticed.

One of our core aims was bringing people together to improve feelings of connection and belonging. The impact here was powerful and, at times, unexpected.

The shared ritual of gathering around the campfire at the start and end of each session created a strong sense of togetherness. The fire became a central holding point — offering warmth, light, food, and a shared focus. We hoped for connection, but what emerged was a genuinely felt sense of belonging that carried over into the young people's day-to-day lives.

What surprised us most was the depth of connection the young people formed with the natural world. We hoped that they would form bonds with each other; we didn't anticipate the delight and meaning they found in the robin, fox, and deer that visited regularly, or the way they attuned to the changing landscape as spring emerged. Lying on their backs, forest-bathing while buzzards circled overhead, became a moment of calm and shared wonder.

This eco-systemic connection strengthened their intra-group relationships. Feeling part of the wider environment seemed to make it easier for them to feel part of the group.

A phrase emerged that became a kind of mantra:

“The forest will still be here for you next week, no matter what happens in between.”

This sense of continuity and safety was deeply regulating for many of the young people.

We are currently searching for funding to continue this project into the summer term and next academic year.

**tangled
feet**



The Outdoor Project

What The Young People Say



*“making
friends”*



*“feeling free even if
it’s just for an hour”*



*“I had something
to look forward to”*





“I enjoyed being in the woods very much, the people were kind and it was a comfortable environment, the activities made my week.”

“Alex and Susie were so understanding, they let us be us, they gave us trust and freedom.”





“I learnt to make a fire, to paint with natural resources and to appreciate nature more.”



“It made me feel free and I found peace from this”

“I’ve been able to keep calm and feel free when connecting with nature.”





“Seeing birds and animals I’ve never seen before.”



“Sitting around and talking to the people I go school with. Never been able to hear their stories and connect on a deep level like we have done in the forest.”



“I’ve learnt more about my emotions, understanding of how I feel and how to deal with it in the correct way.”



“It's helped me feel VERY free when most percent of the time I'm not really. I loved how I was able to do whatever knowing they could trust me.”

