



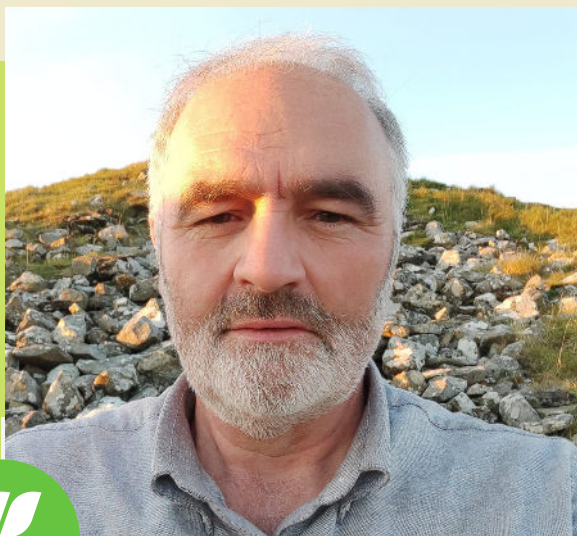
BRINGING THE CLASSROOM INTO THE FOREST

A Training Guide



An Roinn Talmhaíochta,
Bia agus Mara
Department of Agriculture,
Food and the Marine

MESSAGE FROM OUR CHAIRMAN



Complemented by a video training series and additional resources available on our website:

northeastforestrygroup.ie, this guide will help you design and execute educational forest tours.

**NORTH EAST FORESTRY GROUP
CHAIRMAN
DEREK MCCABE**

The North East Forestry Group is a forest owner group with over 100 members in Cavan, Louth, Meath and Monaghan. Having completed a successful Woodland to Workshop Project in 2023, from our members we identified a demand to establish an educational connection between secondary schools and their local forest owners.

In the past year, as part of a pilot project funded by the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, NEFG members successfully hosted five forest tours across counties Meath and Cavan, involving around 200 students from five different schools.

These visits provided students with practical, hands-on experiences in forestry, directly reinforcing what they were learning in class. The students, ranging from First Year to Transition Year, participated in tours that complimented their curricula, especially the *Wood Science in Our Environment* module from the second year Woodwork curriculum.

With guidance from Teagasc's Forestry Development Officer, Kevin O'Connell, we ensured the tours were engaging and adaptable to weather conditions by having shelters and facilities available where possible. Our members carefully planned each visit to include interactive tasks like tree measurement and environmental analysis, allowing the students to immerse themselves in forest science.

The key takeaway from these tours was the importance of keeping routes simple, short, and engaging. Early communication with teachers was critical to aligning the tour with educational objectives, making each visit highly relevant to the students' learning.

Looking ahead, we are thrilled to introduce this manual, which provides a step-by-step guide for foresters interested in rolling out similar tours. With the positive feedback we've received, and ongoing support from experts like Teagasc, we are confident that more schools will benefit from these valuable learning experiences in the future.

**CLASSROOM INTO THE FOREST
MANUAL**

Taking the Classroom into the Forest

Forests are crucial ecosystems that play a vital role in the health of our planet. They offer an invaluable resource for education, especially for teenagers who are at a formative stage in their understanding of the environment. Educating young minds about forests can foster a sense of responsibility and stewardship, encouraging future generations to value and protect natural spaces.

Benefits to schools and communities

- **Environmental Awareness:** Enhances students' understanding of ecological systems and the importance of conservation.
- **Interactive Learning:** Offers hands-on learning experiences that can be more impactful than classroom lessons.
- **Physical Activity:** Encourages physical fitness through outdoor activities.
- **Community Engagement:** Strengthens ties between the forest and the local community.

Benefits for forest owners

- The business viability of hosting forest tours as an educational initiative lies in its potential to **diversify income streams** and enhance community engagement.
- By establishing a strong connection with local schools and educational bodies, forest owners can position themselves as key contributors to environmental education.
- Over time, this can lead to increased demand for paid tours and workshops, offering opportunities for revenue through school partnerships, grants, or public funding.
- Additionally, showcasing sustainable forestry practices can strengthen the forest owner's reputation, potentially leading to further business growth in areas like eco-tourism or local timber sales.

This guide is designed to help forest owners develop, plan, and execute successful school tours. It covers everything from initial planning to post-tour activities, ensuring that your programme is educational, engaging, and safe.

Assessing Your Woodland

When assessing your forest's viability for hosting school tours, there are a number of factors to consider:

- **Access:** Do you have parking facilities for a school bus? Are your pathways sufficiently clear for students to walk through safely? If not, are you prepared to install these facilities?
- **Size and variety:** Have you a good range of species and size of forest?
- **Tour guide skills:** Are you a confident public speaker that can engage with, entertain and educate students? Are you well educated on the species and forestry skills? If not, are you prepared to undertake additional training? Your local forest owner group or Teagasc advisor may be able to recommend useful training courses.

Engaging with Schools

In the early stages, consider schools where you may have an existing link. For example, have you supplied timber to a woodwork class? Do any of your friends or neighbours work in a local school?

- Beginning a conversation with these connections will help you establish the needs and interests of your local schools. These exploratory conversations will be useful to understand which areas of the various different schools curriculum would benefit a forest visit.
- Within this project, NEFG member forests were attended by Second Year Woodwork students, but there is potential to devise a unique programme with Transition Year groups, maths, religion, ag science etc.
- Once you have secured interest from a school, holding a pilot tour will be useful. You may decide against charging a fee for this, to ensure your offering is strong and market-ready.

PLANNING YOUR TOUR

Forestry in Ireland plays a vital role not only in environmental sustainability but also in fostering a deeper connection between communities and the natural world, offering rich opportunities for education and eco-tourism.



Identifying your audience

Understanding the needs and interests of your target audience is critical:

- **Age Group:** Tailor your programme to the educational level and interests of teenagers.
- **Educational Objectives:** Align the tour content with school curriculums and educational standards.
- **Special Needs:** Consider accessibility and any special requirements for students with disabilities. Running a working commercial forest may prevent you from making these considerations, but if it may be possible to be as inclusive as possible, it's worth considering.



Learning about your forest

Before you can begin planning school tours, it's essential to have a thorough understanding of your forest:

- **Flora and Fauna:** Identify the types of plants, trees, and wildlife present in your forest.
- **Geography and Terrain:** Map out the forest's trails, water bodies, and unique features.
- **History and Management:** Ensure you can speak about the various types of species and forestry management practises fluently.



Defining Educational Goals

Define clear educational goals for your tours:

- **Knowledge Goals:** What should students know about forests and ecology by the end of the tour?
- **Skills Goals:** What practical skills (e.g., navigation, observation) should they acquire?
- **Behavioural Goals:** How should the tour influence their attitudes towards the environment?



Legal and Safety Considerations

Ensure that your programme complies with legal and safety regulations:

- **Permits and Permissions:** Secure any necessary permits from local or national authorities.
- **Safety Protocols:** Develop comprehensive safety guidelines, including emergency procedures and first aid measures.
- **Insurance:** Obtain appropriate insurance cover for liability and accidents.

DESIGNING YOUR TOUR

What knowledge will students take away from visiting your forest?

All forests are different, so embrace what makes your plantation unique. Generally, the process of building a tour can be replicated with some thought and consideration. Speak to the teachers in your local area to match up your tour to their curriculum. This could include Woodwork, Geography, Mathematics, Biology, Chemistry or even Religion or SPHE.

Curriculum Development	Engaging Audience	Structured Itinerary
<p>Core Topics: Focus on topics such as forest ecology, wildlife, conservation, and sustainable practices.</p>	<p>Field Experiments: Measure plots showing trees, planting trees.</p>	<p>Begin with an introduction to the forest, safety briefing and the day's agenda.</p>
<p>Learning Objectives: Define what students should learn from each topic.</p>	<p>Scavenger Hunts: Create educational scavenger hunts to explore different aspects of the forest.</p>	<p>Set up multiple stations for a different topic or activity. End with a summary and a Q&A session.</p>
<p>Hands-On Activities: Incorporate activities like plant identification, measuring, and wildlife tracking.</p>	<p>Interactive Games: Use games to teach concepts like food chains and biodiversity.</p>	<p>Online Resources: Provide access to online resources for further learning after the tour</p>

NORTH EAST FORESTRY GROUP EXPERIENCE

Through the NEFG pilot project, hosts targeted the activities to Second Year Junior Cert woodwork students, as part of their classroom-based assessment. Hosts also included QR codes on signage, directing students to find further resources online.

Consider the user experience. Keep your tour short and engaging, by keeping the visitors moving, active and staying conscious of poor weather conditions.

Assessing Your Risks

Each forest owner is legally responsible for ensuring that their forest is a safe environment for visitors. It is highly recommended that a specific health and safety assessment be conducted for each site to address potential risks, including clearing paths and removing hazards to ensure safe access. While safety measures will vary depending on the location, foresters should consider the following:

- **High-visibility jackets**
- **Masks and ear defenders, particularly if demonstrating sawmilling**

The Health and Safety Authority provides useful templates to assist foresters in conducting their own risk assessments, and we do advise engaging a Health and Safety Assessment. HSA.ie

Child Safeguarding

Under the *Children First Act 2015*, all organisations providing services to children are required to develop clear policies and procedures to ensure a safe environment. When working with schools, the responsibility for child safeguarding primarily rests with them.

However, it is highly recommended that foresters take proactive steps by completing a first aid course, undergoing Garda vetting, and, even consider appointing a designated Child Safeguarding Officer to oversee safety protocols. *For more information and access to relevant training, you can refer to the Tusla website, which provides a comprehensive guide on child safeguarding policies and procedures.* Tusla.ie.

You must seek written consent from parents in advance of any photography or filming.



Insurance

Foresters should ensure they have appropriate insurance to protect both themselves and their visitors. Key policies include **Public Liability Insurance** to cover accidents during tours, and **Employer's Liability Insurance** if you have employees or volunteers.

While state schools may be indemnified under their own insurance but It's essential to confirm this beforehand with the school. Regularly review your cover, especially if you're adding activities like sawmilling demonstrations or educational visits.

Always carry out risk assessments as insurers may require these for claims. It's advisable to consult your existing insurer to ensure your cover meets your needs.

Clothing and Safety Gear

When planning a forest tour, it's important to remind visitors, especially schools, to dress appropriately for Irish weather.

Forests can feel significantly colder than open areas due to shade and wind, often by several degrees. Rain can also be more frequent and heavier under the forest canopy, making proper clothing essential.

Encourage participants to wear **waterproof jackets, sturdy footwear or wellie,** and **layered clothing** to stay warm and dry. Always suggest packing extra layers, hats, and gloves, even in milder seasons, to ensure comfort throughout the tour. This should be highlighted to schools, given students may elect against wearing coats for aesthetics reasons.

For scheduling, **April, May, September,** and **October** are ideal months for school outings, offering better weather conditions without the intense cold of winter or unpredictability of other seasons. Be aware that **June** is often less suitable due to state and end-of-year examinations, making it difficult for schools to participate in off-site activities. Checking in with schools about their calendars can help you plan tours at the most convenient times.

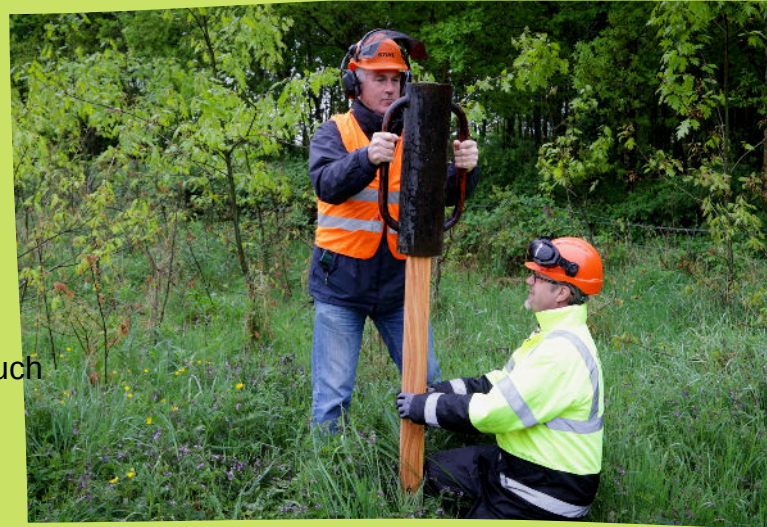
LANDSCAPING THE TOUR

Preparing the site

- **Trail Maintenance:** Keep trails well-maintained and safe.
- **Signage:** Install informative signs and markers throughout the forest.
- **Facilities:** Provide necessary facilities such as toilets and shelters, where possible

Preparing yourself

- **Plan** your tour in advance, scripting what you will say to introduce the forest, explain along the way, and which activities will take place.
- This will help the tour to go smoothly. **Be confident**, this is your forest and you know it better than anyone else.
- **Bring some notes** to refer to if you need them.
- **Trial Runs:** Invite small groups to participate in trial runs of the tour.
- **Feedback:** Gather feedback from participants to identify areas for improvement.
- **Adjustments:** Make necessary adjustments to enhance the tour experience.



Plans for creating this bridge, which crosses a ditch, designed by John Sherlock are available on our website.

TIPS FROM OUR MEMBERS



01 **Martin Oakes, Navan**

Have a plan B in case it rains on the day. Have haybarn or outhouse seating area where the students can change or eat their packed lunch, tea station and toilet facilities.

NEFG members who carried out school tours as part of this pilot project give their top tips for success.

04 **Derek McCabe, Cavan**

Be knowledgeable about your forestry. Don't worry about the income piece until you get organised and have a few visits under your belt. Enjoy showcasing your woodland, you will get as much out of the experience as the students!



02 **John Sherlock, Navan**

Have a short, circular route. Get familiar with all aspects of your forest including wildlife and plant identification. Have some simple tasks for students to do, like plot measurements or tree planting.

03 **Liam Cusack**

Allow adequate time to plan your route and have it clear. Have Risk Assessment reviewed beforehand. Reinforce message to schools to wear appropriate footwear and clothing.

05 **Ciaran Buckley, Cavan**

Keep it simple and high level, involve the students as much as possible through activities

Some useful websites to assist in creating your forest tour. Don't forget to visit our website for access to our full video training guide, signs, and other resources.

<https://northeastforestrygroup.ie/school-tour-pilot-project/>

HSA Guide to Risk Assessments and Safety Statements

https://www.hsa.ie/eng/publications_and_forms/publications/safety_and_health_management/guide_to_risk_assessments_and_safety_statements.pdf

Tusla Child Safeguarding Guide

https://www.tusla.ie/uploads/content/Tusla_-_Child_Safeguarding_-_A_Guide_for_Policy,_Procedure_and_Practice.pdf

Teagasc video training

<https://www.teagasc.ie/news--events/daily/forestry/>

Bringing the classroom into the forest, and the forest into the classroom.

Teagasc's Forestry Development Officer, Kevin O'Connell played an critical role in supporting our forest owners taking part in the pilot.

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A North East Forestry Group Initiative funded by the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine.

Visit northeastforestrygroup.ie for full video training, signage and other resources or to book a school tour.



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