

Most Innovative SEND Intervention

Rowdeford School

What the Judges Said

Amazing use of outdoor learning environment to meet needs. A creative programme making the full use of the grounds and evidencing the impact.

Context

Rowdeford is a secondary (11 – 16 years), co-educational, Special School for students with complex learning difficulties. Some have additional sensory impairment, physical difficulties or medical needs.

Rowdeford School is committed to providing for the needs of each individual pupil through a values-based curriculum delivered by an expert, experienced and dedicated team of staff. The pupils are grouped in small, well-staffed classes and provided with high quality learning and teaching opportunities, including Learning Outside the Classroom (LOTC). The positive atmosphere at the school is part of Rowdeford's belief that we need to nurture pupils' self-confidence and self-esteem as well as helping pupils to develop their independence. We are a specialist school for pupils with Communication and Interaction difficulties, with all the additional resources, staffing and expertise required to support this. We pride ourselves on our caring, supportive and happy atmosphere.

Rowdeford school has a programme that clearly meets the criteria of both the most innovative intervention and excellence in a special school. The attached documentation details why we feel the programme illustrates how the school has gone 'above and beyond' the expectations for a special school, by the creation of this alternative provision programme for students in mainstream schools in Wiltshire. The attached documentation illustrates why this programme should be considered for the 'Most Innovative Special Needs Intervention' Award Category. We also believe that the Plus Programme demonstrates Excellence in a Special School, although note that only one category can be entered. The documentation includes a full description of the Plus Programme, along with 4 of the most recent newsletters (extracted from the whole school newsletter).

Entry

Rowdeford school has a programme that clearly meets the criteria of both the most innovative intervention and excellence in a special school. The Rowdeford Plus Programme lives up to the title by offering a unique alternative provision programme. The Programme supports mainstream schools in Wiltshire, providing placement opportunities for vulnerable students with special educational needs and/or social and communication difficulties including Autism. These students, who are disengaged with or let down by the conventional educational system, are thriving within the outdoor learning environment offered at Rowdeford School. Rowdeford is exceeding their duties, by enabling the interposition of these students to access the amazing opportunities and thrive in the exceptional environment. The Plus Programme is not only about building confidence, social skills and improving mental health of these students, it offers tacit learning opportunities for children who are often totally divorced from the outside world.

The Rowdeford mission is to be at the forefront of specialist education; providing excellent learning in inspirational environments and developing core values, communication and independence. The mainstream support Plus Programme is part of this mission; it recognizes the need for smooth, calm and secure transition between educational environments, in addition to supporting pupils in their mainstream school life and as they prepare for college. Our Plus Programme is a fully staffed suite of outdoor courses designed to offer learning experiences and qualifications that emphasize the development of social communication, alongside functional skills, better preparing pupils for the challenge of change and the diversity of the community in which they live and learn.

Rowdeford House and grounds was purchased by Wiltshire County Council in the early 1960's, then established as a special school for girls from 1963. By the 1990s it had become a mixed special school serving the whole county. The school has always benefited from 22 acres of amazing grounds, which include the parkland associated with the manor house, the Victorian walled gardens, extensive mixed woodland and numerous outdoor classroom spaces. Over time the school has evolved and improved these outdoor spaces, from the renovation of the walled gardens and Victorian greenhouse, addition of farm animals in a purpose-built animal area, a Yurt and the most recent conversion of an old dairy building to provide the Ingrid Sidmouth outdoor learning centre.

With the introduction and subsequent overhauls of the National Curriculum, opportunities for learning outside the classroom (LOtC) were effectively sidelined.

However, the Leadership Team at Rowdeford have always been aware of the benefits that SEND children gain from LOtC, seeking ways of incorporating outdoor learning into the curriculum whilst still meeting the Government's rigid requirements for subject-based learning. The School has recently received a Gold Award LOtC (Learning Outside the Classroom) – a first for a UK Special School recognizing the extremely high quality of this particular aspect of the school's work. Furthermore, there is now international recognition and proven research that LOtC opens doors to young people with special needs, providing rewarding and sustainable futures both in the community and workplaces.

A 2010 study from the University of Rochester found that spending time outdoors not only makes you happier, it can lead to an increased sense of vitality. It has also been found to have a calming effect on the mind, ease depression, spark creativity and improve attention and focus. A five-year study, which examined 500 children from 14 primary schools across Melbourne, Australia, found that those children who spend break times in more natural playgrounds as opposed to asphalt ones feel better rested and therefore more able to concentrate back in the classroom. The researchers discovered that had a direct correlation to exam results and attainment. But despite these findings, a recent survey of parents revealed that three-quarters of UK children spend less time outside than prison inmates. This means schools have an opportunity to make a huge difference to young people's mental health by increasing time spent outdoors. This is where the facilities at Rowdeford provide a crucial opportunity to meet the needs of young people who are struggling in mainstream schools.

A further study in 2010 to examine the benefits of outdoor experiences for children with autism was conducted by interviewing teachers, parents and volunteer workers as to how they perceived the benefits of taking a child with autism outside to learn. The main benefits that they reported were improved physical activity, better social interactions and communication, and in some cases that child specific sensitivities decreased when the child spent more time outdoors. Outdoor learning helps to manage difficult behaviour so that children are in a much better, happier and calmer place mentally, and so more ready and open to learning.

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) is common in children with autism. Research on the physical benefits of exposure to nature has highlighted that time spent outdoors can help fight ADHD, and psychologists have linked contact with nature to restored attention, recovery from mental fatigue and enhanced mental

focus. A greater ability to focus immediately after spending time outdoors in nature and shorter recovery periods for stress and anxiety have also been recorded.

It is not just direct contact with nature that makes the difference, but also having a view of and access to more natural settings which has been shown to benefit children's cognitive functioning. While not all autistic children suffer with ADHD, the message here is entirely clear. More time spent engaged in outdoor learning and play has tremendous benefit for autistic children in terms of their behaviour.

Ofsted has produced a range of documents and case studies to demonstrate the importance of LOtC, and to support schools to develop LOtC opportunities for their pupils. A key document is the 2008 report *Learning outside the classroom: How far should you go?* This is a survey of a range of schools and educational establishments which examines LOtC in practice, and highlights what schools are doing well and where there is room for improvement. Key findings of the report include the following, all of which are being achieved at Rowdeford:

- When planned and implemented well, learning outside the classroom contributed significantly to raising standards & improving pupils' personal, social and emotional development.
- Learning outside the classroom was most successful when it was an integral element of long-term curriculum planning and closely linked to classroom activities.
- The success of learning outside the classroom depended very much on the leadership of the schools and colleges.

The existence of the Council for Learning Outside the Classroom (CLOtC) is another example of the growing importance of LOtC. It is a registered charity existing to champion learning outside the classroom. They believe that every child should be given the opportunity to experience life and lessons beyond the classroom walls as a regular part of growing up. The CLOtC ensure that more young people have access to these life-changing educational experiences by providing support on the ground, facilitating the sharing of best practice and promoting the benefits of LOtC in raising attainment and aspirations, reducing truancy and re-motivating those who are disengaged from their education.

There is another organization called Learning Through Landscapes (LTL), which states that learning outdoors brings teaching alive. LTL has built up a comprehensive library of research into the benefits of outdoor learning and play for children. This research builds a substantiated case for increased outdoor learning

and play in education. This includes a RSPB report that states: “The consequence of removing nature from children can be likened to a malnourished child whose development is slowed and possibly damaged. How permanent this damage may be is for future generations to research but as discussed earlier the negative attitudes to nature of adults who did not have access to nature as a child are worrying..... For childhood development access to nature should be as important as a good diet, education and activity. In fact, as we have seen, nature is a vital ingredient to help all these areas to develop.”

There have been many recent news articles and research papers detailing the problems that the digital age is creating for the current generation of young people. As children are exposed to gaming and electronic devices, they are leading an ever more sedentary lifestyle. This can result in a “nature deficit disorder,” which is a way to describe the psychological, physical and cognitive costs of human alienation from nature. Whilst not yet proven, it is suggested that “nature deficit disorder” in any child may lead to obesity and possible psychological and academic issues.

“Xbox detox”, is something that researchers have observed repeatedly when studying the effect of nature on the brain. Outdoor learning allows students to put their focus back on nature. Consistent exposure to nature decreases stress and anxiety, helps elevate mood, and helps with emotion. It is therefore vitally important that the Council seek to build learning opportunities that take pupils out of the classroom. This may be mathematics lessons, in which challenges are measuring tasks around the school or counting in the garden, hunting for different types of mini-beasts or a tree survey. All of this is available at Rowdeford.

Much of this above research has been published in the last three years. Back in 2012, the success of the LOtC opportunities at Rowdeford was clearly evident, resulting in the appointment of a team solely responsible for the outdoor learning opportunities. With this appointment came the inspiration, experience and motivation to open the LOtC opportunities for other SEND children in mainstream schools. The team proposed alternative placements for BTEC awards in subjects such as Land Based Studies/Sustainability for KS4 students, with provision for KS3 based on The John Muir Award Scheme and Rowdeford’s own Tree Awards.

The Rowdeford School Tree Awards recognize student achievements in practical outdoor skills as well as in the areas of co-operation, communication, resilience, independence and problem solving. They link directly to national curriculum levels in English, Maths and Personal, Social and Health Education (PSHE) and closely to

other curriculum areas. The Tree Awards operate across the school, linking to the values-based education; they give the students universal positive values to take with them into the world, making for a better world.

The young people who attend Rowdeford as an outreach resource base are typically divorced from all forms of outdoor activities and disengaged from learning. The facilities at Rowdeford, in addition to the high caliber staff team that manage them, allow these students to experience the natural world, to understand how to care for it, to learn life skills in terms of horticulture and animal care, to develop an interest in their natural surroundings and so many other invaluable skills. Their well-being, self-confidence, communication and teamwork improves as they begin to embrace the outdoor environment that often initially seems almost foreign to them. By using the John Muir award scheme, we have encouraged many of our plus programme students to get involved in outdoor activities. Since its inception, we have also enabled students to gain BTECs in Sustainability and Land Based Studies, with the Primary Programme and Duke of Edinburgh Bronze Award added this year for the first time.

In Summary, the Plus Programme aims to:

- 1: Encourage the holistic development of each child so they believe in their own ability, can the best they can and achieve their full potential.
- 2: Enable young people to be inspired, have the opportunity to understand the natural world and experience success.
- 3: Improve self-esteem by giving each child a voice, allowing them to be heard, be treated and valued as an individual.
- 4: Allow each child to have a sense of belonging, feel safe and confident.
- 5: Provide new transferrable and valuable skills that will lead to a better future.

The outdoor learning approach ensures that the students can:

- develop reflective and inquisitive thinking along with problem-solving approaches in 'real' situations;
- develop resilience and adaptability;
- identify hazards and risks;
- develop a love, appreciation and respect for nature and all that is living;
- develop an understanding of how we can look after our environment;
- develop collaborative-working and communication skills;
- benefit from positive health benefits – both physically and mentally – and assist gross and fine-motor development;
- develop a lifelong love of the outdoors.

To measure the progress of each student that enters the Plus Programme, each child has three defined goals, primarily relating to social skills but also to academic factors such as communication, listening and following instructions. So many of the Plus Students have very poor self-esteem and confidence. They struggle within their mainstream schools, either becoming introverted or disruptive. There are students that are initially hesitant to be fully engaged with the activities on offer, although Rowdeford offers them the ability to take themselves off to a 'calm zone' or sit away from the rest of their peers.

We also find that many have had issues with bullying or with isolation for poor choices made at their mainstream school. Over the weeks of attending the Plus Programme, the more challenging learnt behaviours become less prevalent. There are students who return to full-time education after a year on the Plus Programme, others enter with the primary programme or KS3 John Muir days and stay with the outreach to achieve the KS4 qualifications. The drop-out rate is extremely low, with only one child out of 40 leaving after the trial day in the 2018/19 academic year.

The outstanding outdoor facilities for the Plus Programme at Rowdeford ensures that students learn more about themselves. We have seen that as they grow in confidence, learn to set goals and tackle challenges calmly, they become more positive. From being hesitant to even get dirty, we have witnessed students gaining the self-confidence to jump ditches, climb trees, study mini-beasts and clear woodland. They learn how to look after themselves and stay safe as they tackle fire-lighting, use loppers and learn how to prune trees. The more academic elements of the course are differentiated, with the detail tailored to the individual's interests. This often requires the staff going above and beyond, by offering breaktimes

Inclusion of the Plus Programme within our main school carries many benefits. These not only include effective and efficient support with the gardens/woodland, but also extended peer group and social interaction opportunities at break and lunch; opportunities for joint sports activities; behaviour support back up; additional experienced and trained staff to maximise student success. There are also opportunities for students from the main school to be extended academically and socially by joining the Plus Programme and completing the BTEC.

The Plus Programme Today

All Plus Programme days start with 'Catch-up', where the students indicate where they are on the 'Thumb Thermometer'. They are given a chance to say why they have chosen the up, to the side or down stance of their thumb. Each student is also

encouraged to identify a highlight and lowlight of their week, although they often need to settle into the Plus Programme before they are prepared to offer this information. For those with communication and self-esteem difficulties, this catch-up time is an ideal progress indicator; when a student begins to actively partake with their own experiences, whether encouraged by the supporting staff or of their own volition, it is extremely rewarding. Catch-up is also used to discuss a topic of the day; this may be a statement like 'what would the world be like if there was no colour', or a debate on a subject like 'should social media be banned?'. By the Spring term, every student has something to offer to these discussions.

The primary group and KS3 students then head outdoors for Session 2, where they are divided into two groups. On a typical day, one group undertakes animal care and horticultural/ woodland jobs, whilst the other starts the first planned activity. The recent studies of the impact of animals in educational settings confirm they are beneficial for the wellbeing of SEND children.

Research has proven that interacting with animals can act as a buffer against social stress, combat feelings of loneliness, reduce anxiety, depression, and fear that many of the Plus Students experience. Furthermore, formal studies indicate that behavioral problems decrease while positive social interactions and a desire to participate are gained through animal-assisted therapy. The farm animals on the site are not just an educational resource, but an unquantifiable benefit for the pupils. Once some initial reticence is overcome from some individuals who have never come in contact with farm animals, the access has a definitive calming effect. Many Plus Students demonstrate positive behaviour characteristics as soon as they are around the sheep, pigs and hens. Recently, working with baby chicks captivated and calmed the groups interacting with them, with the students listening to instructions and taking it in turns to hold the chicks gently.

Rowdeford has formed a partnership with a local farmer, which also benefits the Plus Programme. The farmer has built up his stock of therapy animals, which include rabbits, guinea pigs, sheep, Shetland ponies, alpaca and cattle which he regularly brings to the school. The Plus Programme Students also visit his farm, where they undertake further animal care activities.

Session 2 ends with breaktime along with the main school, then in Session 3 the groups will undertake two more activities before lunch. They then have lunch and break with the main school, with the option of enjoying a home-cooked meal from the Rowdeford Kitchens. Many positive friendships have been formed between the students of Rowdeford and the Plus Students, with preconceived ideas about Rowdeford being for 'special' children extinguished.

Session 4 allows for the students to fill in their Journals (see below), comprising a sheet with pre-printed boxes for recording what they have done, what they enjoyed, who they enjoyed working with and any ideas for what they would like to do in the future on the Plus Programme. Recently, the students have requested more cooking and pond dipping, although ideas have ranged from building rafts, working more with Di the Gardener to doing more art work.

The students then head outside, whatever the weather, for a team game and then 'reward' time. The team game session utilizes traditional games like 'man hunt' and 'capture the flag', or ball games such as dodgeball or endball. There have also been Woodland Olympics, where the students were encouraged to build their own events in the woods and timed trials on the trim trail. Reward time allows the students to continue playing the team game, use the go-carts, bicycles and scooters, chill with the animals or just sit and chat.

The KS4 BTEC sessions and DoE group have to be more structured, with the paperwork/skills element undertaken after catch-up in Session 2. There is considerable flexibility in the schedule and timings, so if there are students who are particularly anxious or inattentive, the practical elements of both courses can be moved around. The success of the Plus Programme is this flexibility and the ability to split the group between the staff. The students are generally on a 2:12 ratio, although where there are specific needs from individuals, the staff will vary the groupings to ensure the welfare of each young person is prioritized.

Another aspect of the Plus Programme that goes above and beyond expectations is the feedback to the main schools. Regular email contact is maintained with the SENCO leaders/Deputies, along with a termly report for each student. The Plus Programme Leader will also attend Annual Reviews wherever possible. By being able to observe the students in smaller groups, the feedback to the Annual Reviews is invaluable; the Leader has been able to direct the way the most vulnerable students are being treated at their main schools, given direction for goals and aspirations, or ensured that other alternative provision is sort to secure more vocational courses in local colleges. The uniqueness of the Plus Programme has enabled the strengths and attributes of the students to be recognized, giving them aspirations for the future. By liaising on such a regular basis with the main schools, many of these aspirations can be met in some way. Even by changing the way that a student enters their main school in the morning has allowed them to access more mainstream education. By raising self-esteem and aspirations, we have seen students re-enter the mainstream system to achieve GCSE courses. It is so easy to be lost in a class of 30+ and under achieve.

The Duke of Edinburgh Bronze and Silver award courses began in 2018. The Plus Programme offers the additional support to students to ensure the maximum potential for success. It is run alongside the DofE program at Rowdeford School, which has averaged a 95% completion rate for the award over the last three years.

Working with the DofE values and international recognition, we are opening opportunities to students who would normally not be able to access such schemes and qualifications. We use the DofE award scheme to help students identify their strengths, at the same time allowing them to be more self-reliant and personally assured. The recent practice expedition ensured that the current cohort succeeded beyond their own expectations. Teenagers who had no experience prior to coming on the Plus Programme marched through hailstorms, up hills and camped in sub-zero temperatures – life experiences that their normal technology-driven and sedentary lives would never have provided. The elation when they completed was palpable. These positive, life-changing experiences is what the Plus Programme provides.

The past 4 newsletters have also been attached to this document to provide some additional detail. These opportunities are simply not available to those who would benefit the most unless they have access to innovative interventions such as the Plus Programme.

The future

This snapshot of the Plus Programme reflects the potential it has in the future. It is an ever-evolving service to young people who are flailing in the mainstream system. For the next academic year, a WJEC entitled Healthy Living and Fitness will be integral to the DofE course forming part of the Physical element. The students will develop an understanding of factors which contribute to their own and others healthy living and fitness, gaining both DofE award and WJEC qualifications by the end of the course.

We will also be offering the WJEC 'Pathways to Work'. This course will offer an Award, Certificate or Diploma following the Preparing for Work with Personal and Social Development Pathways. With the facilities and expertise on offer at Rowdeford, there are an extensive number of units that can be covered, including:

- horticulture, woodland and grounds maintenance;
- animal care (rare breed pigs, sheep and chickens);
- team work and communication;
- hospitality and catering;

- design technology;
- personal and social development;
- communication and social Interaction.

In summary, the 2019/2020 Plus Programme will offer the following alternative placements:

Option	Key Stage	Qualification and Level	Course Specific Content
Primary Provision	KS2	Primary Tree Award Scheme	A mainstream support programme that recognises the need for smooth, calm and secure transition from primary to secondary environments. Our curriculum is influenced by Forest Schools and John Muir, with a Tree Award scheme to incentivise progress.
KS3 Programme A 3 year programme – Discover (Yr1 in the cycle) Explore	3+	John Muir Discover Award Rowdeford Tree Award Certification (Cherry/Lime)	Forest-Schools themed activities, classroom based communication and social

(Yr2 in the cycle)
Conserve
(Yr3 in the cycle)

interaction programme, conservation work.

3+

John Muir Explorer Award
Rowdeford Tree Award
Certification (Oak / Yew)

Programme develops communication skills alongside woodland and gardening activities.

Permaculture themed activities and projects

focusing on understanding the world from a

different perspective.

This is done both using the outdoors and classroom based activities.

3+

John Muir Conserver Award
Rowdeford Tree Award
Certification (Beech / Apple)

Horticulture, woodland and grounds

maintenance,

animal care (rare breed

pigs, sheep and chickens),

team work and communication,

personal and social development.

Volunteering, Skills, Physical

Challenges

Preparing for Work

4+

WJEC Entry Level 3
Award = 1 year or
Certificate = 2nd
Year students

Duke of Edinburgh Award

4+

Year 1 – Bronze Award, year 2 – Silver Award.

**Healthy
Living and
Fitness**

WJEC Entry Level 3 Award = 1 year or Certificate = 2nd Year students This will be integral to the D of E course and form part of the Physical element. With the students gaining both D of E award and WJEC qualifications.

and an Expedition section to develop self-assurance and resilience. Candidates can complete a Silver award without the need to complete a bronze award. Additional hours and support will be required. The aim of this qualification is to give learners the opportunity to participate in a variety of sporting and health and fitness activities. Learners will develop an understanding of factors which contribute to their own and others healthy living and fitness.

The Plus Programme will continue to thrive within the uniqueness and value of Rowdeford's learning environment, combined with the expertise and compassion of all the staff. The Programme clearly showcases excellence and 'going above and beyond'. There are a wide range of future opportunities to open up the vital outdoor learning facilities to other local mainstream schools, including 'Forest School' days. Rowdeford could offer this specialized learning approach, as it already compliments the wider context of outdoor and woodland education that is currently offered by the Plus Programme. Furthermore, the boarding facilities still exist, opening the opportunity to expand into residential courses, particularly the Duke of Edinburgh Award. The Plus Programme will continue to develop to enable the lives of their outreach students so positively. Securing recognition from the SEND award scheme would really assist in the promotion of this amazing additional provision.