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Hundreds of new primary places created

HUNDREDS of new primary school places are being created to cope with the rise in young children expected to start school in the next few years.

The number of births in the borough went up by more than 42 per cent between 2001 and 2011 – higher than the rest of London. A numbers check in January this year showed that there were 550 more children in reception classes than in January 2009.

As a result, the royal borough's cabinet agreed to create almost 1,500 new places at four primary schools: Windrush in Thamesmead, De Lucy in Abbey Wood, Alderwood in Eltham, and James Woolfe in Greenwich.

Windrush is set to quadruple in size – providing 840 places for pupils, instead of the current 210. It's making use of an old school building in Woolwich Road, Charlton, which will help meet the growing need for primary school places in the Charlton area.

Meanwhile, places at De Lucy will go up to 630 from 420, Alderwood will increase to 420 from 210, and James Wolfe will grow from 420 to 840. The royal borough is now working on plans to develop all three schools, in consultation with parents. Government grants will fund the new school places.

Cllr Jackie Smith, the royal borough's cabinet member for children's services, said: "We are proud of our track record for providing a first-class education for children from the time they start school on day one. We are getting our primary school expansion plans moving now so that we will be ready for the time when more children in the borough will need a school place."



Our neck of the woods!

Forest school pupils love lessons in the great outdoors - p12&13

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MIDDLE Park Primary in Eltham has just opened its second 'forest school' and this time it's just a short walk away in the grounds of the vicarage at St Saviour's Church.

The Rev Wendy Saunders – known as the pink vicar because of her distinctive hair – is a Middle Park community governor, and offered the school a large chunk of her garden. She said: "It's a win-win for me. It's a big garden, and its upkeep together with the church and the vicarage is getting harder. So it is to our mutual benefit, because I get a smaller garden, and Middle Park gets a new site for a forest school."

Pupils make the five-minute walk twice a week with their qualified forest school leader to check out what's happening in their new outdoor garden school.

Much of the scrub has been cleared by church helpers as well as professionals paid for by a charity grant.

It means children have logs to look under and can watch birds and insects. A shed has been provided where they can store garden tools, and there is an area where they can grow plants and listen to stories.

Official forest school sessions must be led by qualified leaders and Middle Park has two trained forest school leaders with another about to qualify.

Forest school leader Sandra Drummond said: "Being outdoors in a safe environment is vital for the children. They learn to take risks and can use their own initiative on what to use for materials. It's good for their self-confidence and communication skills."

Year 1 pupil, Elise, six, said: "I want to see where animals make their homes." Frankie, also six, said: "I like playing games with the logs." And five-year-old Shemariah said: "We are learning about what's safe to play with, so we don't touch any dangerous stuff."

Daniel, six, said he was digging for treasure, but found a worm instead. "It's disgusting," he said. "I want to wash him a bit, and make him clean."

Middle Park's new forest school was opened in a ribbon-cutting ceremony by the Mayor of Royal Greenwich, Cllr David Grant, in February.

Parent governor Pam Tully said: "It's wonderful seeing the children collect up snails' shells, and that's a lot healthier than sitting and looking at a computer screen." Fellow parent governor Juliet Bourne added: "The children are making up their own games, such as digging holes for foxes. It's widening their horizons, and they've got no fear about getting dirty."

Friends of t

A growing number of 'forest schools' are bringing children closer to nature by allowing them to explore animals, insects, birds, flowers and trees in special outdoor classrooms. It's a Scandinavian

idea that is supported by the royal borough because of the positive impact it has on children's learning and well-being. Sessions give children the chance to go exploring in a safe and

supervised environment builds greater awareness of nature conservation for them as they get older. And for children without back gardens in, it's their first face-to-face experience of snails, w



LOGGING DISCOVERIES: Elise, Frankie, Samantha and Shemariah, left, Daniel inspects his worm



HANDS ON WITH NATURE: Invicta youngsters

INVICTA Primary School teaches forest school lessons not only to their reception pupils but to the youngest of tots in the borough.

The school in Invicta Road, Blackheath, has two areas devoted to forest lessons.

One is part of the children's centre for youngsters and their families, the other is within the school for pupils in reception class.

The forest school has been at Invicta for four years and was unused space beforehand. It is self-sustained by the pupils and a forest school leader. The reception class, made up of four and five year olds, spend an hour and a half a week where they

play games, do activities and experiments in the outdoor facility which is laden with giant logs, brambles, grass and debris. Every week a parent volunteers to help out in the lessons and helps to make hot chocolate as a reward for the children's efforts.

The pupils put on protective waterproof clothing, wellies, hats and gloves and on occasion use penknives and saws to cut rope, wood and branches. Five-year-old Jacob told GT: "I like the lessons because we get to look for lots of things and we learned you can make fire by rubbing wood together really fast."

Samaram, also five said: "I love playing with mud and water and finding things under rocks. I found ants once and they were all different colours, pink, yellow, green, brown. I like playing with mud outside too." Marie Erol, forest school leader for three years said: "These are very much children's sessions and pupils get to expand on

the forest

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or when
r many
s to play
o-face
worms,

beetles – and anything else
they can find by turning over
a log. GT went to see how
Forest Schools are winning
young fans.



RIBBON CUTTING: Mayor David Grant does the honours to open Middle Park's new forest school at St Saviour's Church, above right and below, Thorntree pupils literally get down to earth



CHILDREN from Thorntree Primary School on Thorntree Road enjoy doing their bit for the environment as part of the forest school scheme.

Five-year-old Mabel said: "I learnt to do new things, looking for bugs and looking for plants. I made a cake out of mud and lots of things on the ground."

Leon, also five said: "I love finding lots of woodlice and watching things move, I like climbing and hiding."

Four-year-old Joe added: "I like looking for plants, little ones and big ones with my friend Frankie."

During the classes children are allowed to wander freely at their own pace in a large space. Their individual learning styles are accommodated for and their natural curiosity is allowed to expand through the space.

Headteacher Richenda Fenwick said: "We've found since starting the forest school, children have developed their independence skills and self-esteem through small achievable tasks. It's

wonderful to see children returning from the sessions covered in mud and smiles on their faces.

"The pupils have started to take more care and interest in the natural environment and have the opportunity to explore outdoors and become caretakers of the environment, use their imagination and think more creatively."

The royal borough will shortly be publishing a booklet that outlines the impact of forest schools on children locally.

The A4 booklet 'Forest School In Action', explains the benefits of forest schools and is designed for use by schools, playgroups, childminders and people working with young children

Cllr Jackie Smith, the royal borough's cabinet member for children's services, said: "We have encouraged forest schools because of the positive impact the experiences have on children's self-confidence, personal relationships and learning across all areas of the curriculum."

"Children love spending time outdoors and the sense of freedom they experience is a vital part of growing up. Forest schools provide a safe but challenging environment in which children can explore their understanding of outdoor spaces and learn respect for their environment and living things."



ideas and get
messy with
dirt, mud
and nature.
Nothing is
forbidden,
they have new
ideas every
week. Behaviour
has improved

with some pupils as they get that sense of freedom and fresh air in the sessions and they get the opportunity to expand their knowledge

of science, maths and physical
education as well as thinking
independently and risk
assessing."

Sue Spinks is in charge of the
forest school in the children's centre.
The area was previously a fruit garden.

She said: "We have a drop in session for families to come and get involved in forest lessons. It helps the very youngest children in the borough to engage with the environment and take ownership of their learning as it's less structured and more hands on. Our youngest visitor is just six months old!"

