

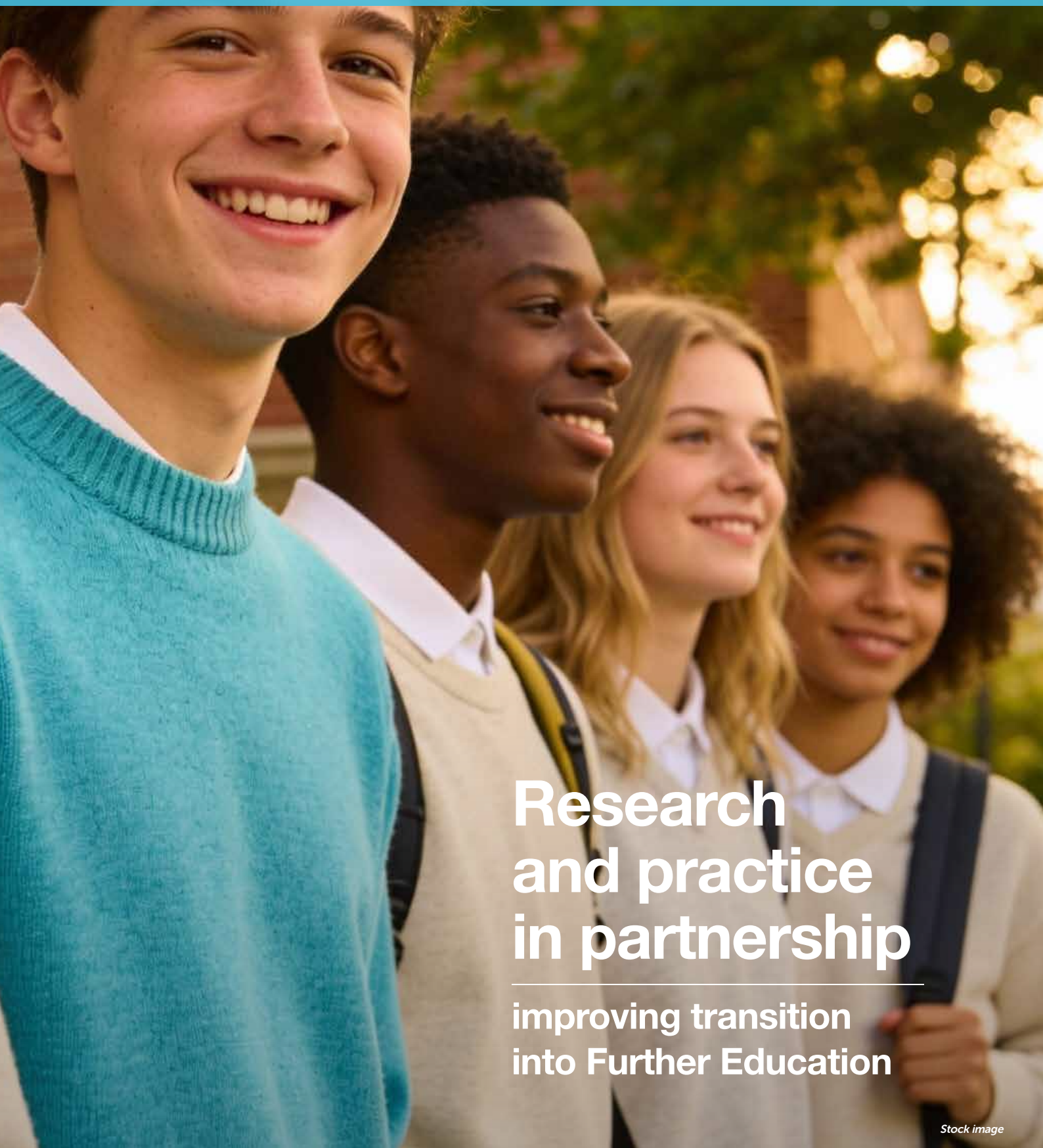
update



Leading Learning through
Action-led Research and Innovation

The latest news from The Laurel Trust

ISSUE 16 • SUMMER 2026



Research and practice in partnership

improving transition
into Further Education

Stock image



Welcome to Update Summer 2026

The three contributions in this latest Update highlight how the Laurel Trust supports practitioner-led research to improve educational outcomes, particularly for disadvantaged learners.

One project, led by Elevare Civic Education Group, focuses on improving the transition from school to further education for learners with SEND, safeguarding needs, or Social, Emotional and Mental Health challenges. Through collaboration between researchers, practitioners, and a dedicated Transition Mentor, the project has strengthened communication, learner support, and transition processes while adapting methods in response to emerging findings.

The second contribution reflects on the Write on Track project, which explores improving writing skills during the transition from primary to secondary education. It emphasises the value of action research, robust methodology, and collaboration in addressing educational challenges. Contributors stress that successful research begins with clear questions, realistic planning, and evidence-based evaluation.

The third contribution, from our previous Consultant Director, offers some advice for those considering making an application for a grant from the Trust.

Overall, these articles demonstrate how funding, partnership, and practitioner research can drive innovation, professional learning, and improved outcomes for children and young people.

Bill Goddard, Chair of Trustees
The Laurel Trust



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Research and practice in partnership

Improving transition into Further Education

Thea Durdy, Senior Policy and Research Officer; **Amal Ali**, Post-16 Transition Mentor
Elevare Civic Education Group



Supporting the transition

At Elevare Civic Education Group, we are committed to ensuring that all learners are supported to achieve, regardless of their background. Comprising London South East Academies Trust, London South East Colleges, and Elevare Education Foundation, our organisation is uniquely positioned to support

learners as they transition from our schools into post-16 education.

This transition can present particular challenges for learners with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND), including from Alternative Provision (AP), and/or with safeguarding needs. Although many of these learners are academically capable of progressing into mainstream further education, some still face challenges,

particularly among learners with Social, Emotional and Mental Health (SEMH) needs.

We are bringing together research and practice to address these challenges, supported by the Laurel Trust. Our research explores how a dedicated transition mentor, alongside revised transition processes, can strengthen learners' integration into college, improve retention, and support positive longer-term outcomes. »

A collaborative model:

bridging research and practice

At the heart of this project is a close working partnership between research and frontline delivery. The Transition Mentor works directly with learners, families and staff; the research team leads on the design, implementation and evaluation of the research; and the partnerships and projects team lead on client relationship, budget and project management. This collaboration ensures the work is grounded in day-to-day delivery while drawing on research expertise, allowing approaches to be tested, reflected on and adapted in real time. The Laurel Trust's funding supports this collaboration and enables us to deliver a range of activity including CPD, marketing and the delivery of our research.

Our support for the Transition Mentor to deliver research is structured in two main ways - through professional development and collaboration. They have undertaken training with the research team and specific action research training through the Social Research Association, funded through our budget from the Laurel Trust. This has strengthened both her confidence and methodological rigour. We also hold weekly meetings, which provide space for us to review progress, address challenges and reflect on findings together. Termly visits from the Laurel Trust provide opportunities for us share our learning, showcase our practice and gain expert advice and direction from the Trust.

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Learning through challenge

Engaging learners meaningfully in the research has been one of our main challenges, which makes participation in interviews difficult for some.

Through collaboration, we adapted our approach. Interviews were scheduled more flexibly during tutorials, between lessons and, where appropriate, via phone. Questions were streamlined to focus on essential areas, ensuring conversations were manageable and purposeful.

These small changes improved participation and enabled us to gather useful insights from learners. We also recognised that another activity strand, learner co-design of research materials, would be difficult to achieve within current engagement levels. These small changes improved participation and enabled us to gather useful insights from learners. We also recognised that another activity strand, learner co-design of research materials, would be difficult to achieve within current engagement levels. Instead, subject to approval from the Laurel Trust, we are planning to redirect our budget towards supporting and engaging with learners between the end of year 11 and beginning of college through course taster and bespoke 'Welcome to LSEC sessions'.

Early progress and emerging insights

The project has already led to several positive developments. Communication between schools, families and the college has »



strengthened through more consistent use of direct contact such as phone calls and messaging. Improved identification and tracking of learners within college systems is enabling more targeted intervention, while clearer staff roles are supporting a more consistent transition process.

Alongside these developments, the project continues to deliver a broad programme of activity. This includes improving intelligence sharing between schools and the college, reviewing onboarding and curriculum processes, strengthening the application and marketing offer, and preparing Year 11 learners more effectively for post-16 education. One of the most valuable aspects of our work has been the use of an action research approach. Rather than following a fixed model, we are able to adapt to emerging challenges and insights. This strengthens the quality of the research and shows how it can be embedded within everyday roles. Furthermore, by supporting a frontline practitioner to engage directly with research, we hope to inspire other practitioners working directly with learners, as we show how research sits within the context of real delivery rather than separate from it.

Looking ahead

As we move into the summer term, our focus will shift towards further engagement with learners, capturing



reflections on their first year of college and identifying ongoing support needs. We will also begin preparing for the next cohort of learners transitioning into college in September 2026.

The summer will provide an opportunity to review our data and assess progress against key outcomes such as attendance, retention, achievement and progression. This will inform our final reporting and

recommendations, with the aim of developing a model that can be applied more widely.

Our organisation is strongly committed to this project and to the partnerships that underpin it- both internally and with the Laurel Trust. By bringing together research and practice, we aim to not only improve learner outcomes, but also to demonstrate the value of practitioner-led research. 





Write on...

Reflections on my experience of the Laurel Trust and the Write on Track project

***Dr Katherine Vincent** was previously a headteacher and, until recently, Senior Director for Research, Innovation and Improvement at Mulberry Schools Trust*



**The Laurel Trust:
improving outcomes
for children and
young people**

When time is short and budgets are tight, it can be difficult for teachers and leaders to create the space needed to engage in action research. Yet we know that this type of work is a powerful way for teachers and leaders to deepen and

refine their practice. Practitioner research may be particularly vital in schools serving communities with high levels of socio-economic disadvantage, where pupils often face multifaceted barriers to learning. Paradoxically, of course, it is often in these very contexts where the intensity of operational pressures leave the least time and capacity for teachers to reflect on and research their own practice.

In this context, the funding allocated by the Laurel Trust provides a powerful lever for system-wide improvement. It creates the space for groups of schools to pause, reflect, consider and share the work they are doing to improve outcomes for children and young people. It does not impose solutions from the outside, but instead creates the conditions for schools to generate knowledge from within. »

When time is short and budgets are tight, it can be difficult for teachers and leaders to create the space needed to engage in action research.



Crucially, it recognises that teachers and school leaders are expert practitioners who are well-placed to undertake research in their own contexts.

I first heard about the Laurel Trust when I met Maggie Roger, consultant director, at an educational conference. At the time, I was working for a multi-academy trust in Tower Hamlets, east London. During our initial conversation, I was struck by her passionate commitment to the importance of addressing educational disadvantage, which was also at the heart of our trust-wide vision. It was immediately clear that this was the underpinning driver for the organisation, along with a belief in the importance of well-designed

research, high quality evidence and methodological rigour.

Make the most of feedback

Despite a strong alignment with the Laurel Trust's values, we were unsuccessful in our first funding application. We had proposed a project focused on deepening understanding of educational disadvantage and helping schools to implement strategies to support pupils and families living in poverty. It was obviously disappointing to be unsuccessful. However, one of the most valuable aspects of the experience was the clarity of the feedback we received. The trustees made clear that their decision was not a reflection of the importance of the issue we wanted

to explore, but the way we had articulated our proposed approach and conceptualised the project's methodology and funding.

This helped ensure that, in 2025, we were successful in our second bid for funding. This time, we not only had a good idea but also other key ingredients: a well-defined research question, a structured research inquiry, and a methodological approach which made clear how we would gather and evaluate evidence.

Write on Track

This project grew out of a piece of school-to-school support work which I undertook in collaboration with the executive director of a multi-academy trust in a neighbouring borough. »

...one of the most valuable aspects of the experience was the clarity of the feedback we received.



The work initially focused on improving GCSE English outcomes. In our regular discussions, however a consistent issue kept surfacing: pupils in our secondary schools were struggling with writing accuracy, legibility and fluency, and our understanding of how to support this was not yet developed well enough.

Effective approaches to teaching and assessing reading are in place across both of our trusts, as they are in most primary schools. The vast majority of pupils leave primary school with secure decoding skills, as well as the ability to read fluently and understand increasingly complex texts. Secondary schools build on this strong practice, using evidence-based interventions to address any barriers or gaps. In keeping with the national picture, however, we have done less work to develop the teaching of writing. There is not as much consistency in the writing curriculum in our primary schools. When pupils move up to secondary school, the systems in place to identify and address any gaps in writing skills are not as well developed.

If at first you don't succeed...

Our second, successful application to the Laurel Trust focused on this issue. The Write on Track project was designed as a piece of action research exploring whether a more coherent approach to the writing curriculum, and greater consistency in the teaching of writing, would better support pupils as they moved from primary to secondary education. The project sought not only to address an identified need, but to do so through a structured process of inquiry that would generate practical, transferable insights for schools. This felt particularly important at a time when there was emerging evidence of the challenges faced by pupils during the primary to secondary transition.

We are now mid-way through the project and the initial findings are starting to emerge. One of the most surprising things about the process has been how much we have benefited from the support of the Laurel Trust's consultant director and trustees. The professional discussions we have had during their termly visits have been powerful,

thought-provoking and intellectually stimulating. They have shown genuine interest in helping us to think through the progress of the project and helping us make sense of the evidence. »





Think clearly about the process and the problem

For anyone considering applying for a research grant, I would advise you to start by refining your questions and carefully considering your chosen methodology. It is tempting to start with an intervention, perhaps one you have started and would like to expand into more schools. However, to be successful in the application process, you need to think clearly about the research process as well as the problem you are trying to solve. It is essential to start with a well-framed question and clear methodology, tailored to your context, rather than simply looking to implement an existing idea. You also need to be clear about how you will know whether your approach is making a difference, drawing on a range of evidence such as pupils' work, assessment data and classroom observation.

It is really important to be realistic about capacity. You will need sufficient time to plan, implement,

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gather evidence and reflect. To carry out your research effectively, you need to think carefully at the beginning about who will undertake this work and who will support you to ensure it can be successfully completed. You also need to embrace the flexible and collaborative spirit of learning which underpins the Laurel Trust's work. The goal is not to produce polished outcomes, but to engage in thoughtful, evidence-informed exploration which helps ensure that our work has a positive impact on pupils.

Removing barriers

Across the UK, we are still developing our understanding of the approaches

that are most effective in addressing and removing barriers for children and young people facing educational disadvantage. There are rarely simple solutions. Instead, effective practice depends on context-specific approaches that responds to the realities of each school community. By supporting teachers and leaders to undertake action research, the Laurel Trust is helping to create the conditions for ongoing improvement. I would encourage anyone who is interested in undertaking research which can make a tangible difference to children to contact them to find out more. 





Getting on the bus start an exciting journey...

Maggie Roger is the former Consultant Director of The Laurel Trust.
She has recently become a governor at a specialist college on the south coast.



Some light-hearted advice on writing an effective application

'Research is like a journey into the unknown where every question leads to new answers.'

It then creates new knowledge.

View the journey with confidence

Completing a grant application need not be a chore and help is at hand. Think of your intended research project as professional enquiry or finding out. You do this all the time. Leaders and teachers routinely seek to understand and improve their practice. Research into an aspect of school life you wish to improve or develop will provide the evidence you need to target the desired improvement.

To make an application you will need to be a collaboration of schools.

Getting Started – climb on the bus
Great, you've decided to come on the journey. Some thoughts to guide you:

- If the collaboration is an established one you already have a firm foundation on which to start. Don't worry if you are not part of an established network/group/Trust. Then your first step is to identify and secure commitment from your potential partner schools and/or other organisations.
- Together the partners in the collaboration will need to create a focus for the research and be clear in their minds about the intended improvement it will bring. Then agree a research question. This may be provisional. Try to make it creative and engaging.

'Research is like a journey into the unknown where every question leads to new answers.'

Author unknown

Your research question is the really important starting point.

- A well-thought through research question creates direction and helps to narrow the field of research and make it manageable. It guides your purpose and defines your investigation. Everything that follows should flow from the chosen research question or hypothesis. So do take time with your partner schools to get the research focus and question right for you all. Aim for agreement from the start. »



The fundamental questions at this point in the journey are:

- Why are we wishing or needing to do this research?
- What is it we wish to do?
- How will we do it?
- What will be better when we have completed the research and resulting practice?

Spend some time and thought on this rationale.

Have preliminary and collective discussions with your partners on each of these key questions:

- What has influenced your choice of research? (context, need, policy, national regional or local direction, literature, books, research papers, blogs etc).
- Consider the actual or potential impact on the achievement and well-being of learners.
- How will your intended research enhance the professional knowledge and skills of the adults involved and thereby improve their practice?
- Agree the Lead School and Lead Researcher, identify a 'shadow' lead so that changed circumstances do not hi-jack your research.

The bus is moving and gaining momentum

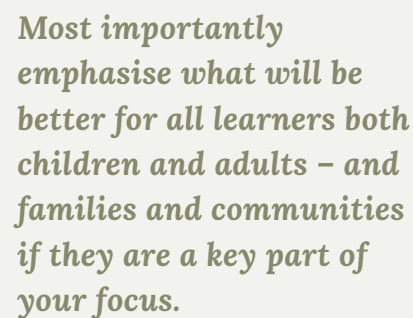
- Talk through and agree a realistic draft timetable and the key activities needed.
- Create a common understanding of

the terms and language to be used and what monitoring will take – whilst recognising the distinctive differences between partner schools, consistency in conducting the research (such as an agreed methodology and the data to be collected) is imperative.

- Have initial discussions on methodology.
- Consider the ethical issues that are, or might, arise in the proposed research and how you would deal with these.
- Think about the perceived risks and ways you might overcome these? »

Consider the actual or potential impact on the achievement and wellbeing of learners.





Finally, here are some useful words to consider when writing your application.

- Discuss the budget needs and try to anticipate how much funding the collaboration will need to deliver the project efficiently and effectively. Do not underestimate the cost but also think about the contributions in kind you are all making in terms of time, venues and resources.
- Check the items of expenditure against The Laurel Trust lists of what it will fund and what it does not.
- Have early shared discussions with your partners on these important points. This will build understanding and commitment and give you a strong start.
- Make sure that Governing Body or the Board of Trustees in the Lead and each partner school are aware of your application and are supportive of it.

Be credible, creative and aspirational but also realistic. The research project needs to be doable alongside everyday school life.

Contributions from partner schools are also helpful – the project needs to work for you all. Solo writing can be a very lonely job. A collective approach is sometimes fun*. It shares the work and brings a greater range and depth of ideas. It also fosters ownership and collective learning from the outset.

*Especially if chocolate or cake or possibly the occasional glass of wine lighten the task. Perhaps all three!



Hidden gems

Exploring the favourite haunts of our project leaders



Scadbury Park Nature Reserve

Sarah Newman

Group Director of PR, Policy and Research, Elevare Civic Education Group

One of my favourite places in Bromley is Scadbury Park Nature Reserve. It's a great place to head for a dog walk or for a jog because it feels like stepping into the countryside without ever leaving south east London. The mix of ancient woodland, open meadows and peaceful trails makes it the perfect place to switch off from a busy day and really enjoy nature. In every season there is something different to see, from wildflowers and ponds to old oak trees and many different birds and other wildlife.

What makes Scadbury even more special is its interesting and very long history. The park is part of the original Scadbury Manor estate, with roots dating back to the 13th century, and you can still explore the remains of the medieval moated manor house hidden within the reserve. It is amazing to think that such a historic site sits alongside more than 300 acres of a protected nature reserve, right here in Bromley.



King Edward's Bay

Andrew Sherlaw

Deputy head teacher, Whitley Bay High School

Tucked just below the rugged outline of Tynemouth Priory, King Edward's Bay is a beautifully sheltered cove that feels both charming and dramatic, with sweeping views up to the historic ruins — a striking medieval site that once served as a monastery and later a strategic coastal defence. The bay itself is one of North Tyneside's most stunning spots, perfect for getting out on the water with a bodyboard, paddleboard or kayak, thanks to its calmer, protected conditions

Just above the sand, Riley's Fish Shack adds to the experience, serving exceptional fresh fish cooked over a BBQ or smoked to perfection — a favourite of food critic Jay Rayner. Altogether, it's a place that effortlessly combines natural beauty, history and outstanding food, making it a highlight of the coastline.



Yorkshire Wildlife Park

Rachel Hodgson

Head of Research and professional Development, Exceed learning Partnership

For the ultimate day out in Doncaster, my first choice is always the Yorkshire Wildlife Park because it trades traditional zoo enclosures for an expansive walkthrough safari. I love that it showcases the unique polar bear project, the rescued lion pride, and the playful seals at the Point Lobos reserve; the animals have so much space to roam, and the relaxed layout is just perfect for stretching your legs and exploring together.

For me, it's a fantastic destination at any time of year, but it becomes even more special during the winter when they run the Winter Illuminations, transforming the grounds after dark into a magical trail of giant, glowing lanterns that turns a chilly evening walk into something spectacular. ✨