

The Rt Hon Bridget Phillipson MP  
Secretary of State for Education  
Department for Education  
*Sent by email*

September 2024

Dear Ms Phillipson,

### **Statutory access to nature across all education settings**

Congratulations on your appointment as Secretary of State for the Department of Education.

On behalf of organisations belonging to the Wildlife & Countryside Link coalition, I am writing to request a meeting to discuss the provision of a statutory access to nature across all education settings. This could help deliver the education and child wellbeing policy commitments contained in the Labour manifesto.

Opportunities to access and connect with green and blue space is critical to the wellbeing of children. Unfortunately, too few children benefit from time spent in safe, good quality natural spaces in their daily lives. Their physical and mental health, wellbeing, and academic performance is suffering as a result.

Many children only spend, on average, 30 minutes outside each day, compared to six hours interacting with electronic screens.<sup>1,2</sup> A study of 3,000 students, conducted by Save The Children, reported climate anxiety in 70% of children.<sup>3</sup> Recently, a lack of outdoor space is thought to be exacerbating Britain's child obesity crisis.<sup>4</sup> Minimal time in nature is placing a preventable burden on the NHS, whilst leaving young people unprepared to adapt to their changing world. These harms are concentrated in low income areas. Children from low-income households and/or more deprived neighbourhoods spend nearly 50% less time visiting greenspace compared to higher-income households and/or more affluent neighbourhoods.<sup>5,6</sup>

These disparities in wellbeing-boosting access to nature can be addressed by the Labour government. A statutory requirement is needed for nature within all education settings in England to provide access to and regular high-quality engagement with the natural world.<sup>7</sup> This could be enacted by ensuring school grounds provide green space that is biodiverse and safe. Time must be spent in nature every day, whether as part of the curriculum on terrestrial, freshwater, and marine ecosystems or using nature as a learning setting. Doing so would help young people develop meaningful emotional connections with the natural world. All teachers must be supported and equipped with confidence, knowledge and skills to be able to use the natural environment as a tool for learning.

Opportunities to access and connect with nature every day will help pupils get more out of their education. Time spent in nature is associated with positive outcomes for children's learning experiences in schools, including improved attainment and engagement with their peers, teachers, and subject matter.<sup>8</sup> In addition, the Department for Education's 'Children and Nature' programme reported that 94% of participating schools agreed

---

<sup>1</sup> University of Cambridge. (N.D.). The State of Play in the UK.

<sup>2</sup> OSF Healthcare. (2024). Kids' screen time: How much is too much?

<sup>3</sup> Save the Children. (N.D.). Survey reveals scale of climate anxiety among British children on eve of COP27.

<sup>4</sup> The Guardian. (2024). Alarming lack of access to green space fuelling UK child obesity crisis, doctors warn.

<sup>5</sup> Jones, A., Hillsdon, M., & Coombes, E. (2009). Greenspace access, use, and physical activity: Understanding the effects of area deprivation. *Preventive medicine*, 49(6), 500-505.

<sup>6</sup> Oxford Home Schooling. (2022). Wealthy children spend 'double the time outdoors' than those from lower class families.

<sup>7</sup> Wildlife & Countryside Link. (2024). A new statutory requirement for access to and engagement with nature within education.

<sup>8</sup> Natural England. (2023). Children & Nature Programme: the importance of integrating time spent in nature at school.

that the programme had a positive impact on children's mental health, wellbeing, and resilience. Mental health initiatives have been shown to reduce classroom misbehaviour, anxiety, depression, and bullying. Accessing and connecting with nature every day can help build a safe and productive educational space for all pupils.

A greater role for nature in education will also benefit teachers by easing the stresses centred on low engagement, attendance and mood in the classroom. This will help improve teacher retention rates.

Thank you for your consideration of this policy recommendation and meeting request. With frontline experience, policy expertise, public support and diverse voices, we look forward to working with you to better deploy nature to help deliver your manifesto commitments for education and pupil's well-being.

Yours sincerely,

Jenny Davis  
Education and Learning Manager  
(UK), the Wildlife Trusts  
Co-Chair of Link Education and  
Learning Policy Group

Cathriona Hickey  
Head of Conservation Education,  
ZSL  
Co-Chair of Link Education and  
Learning Policy Group

Suzanne Welch  
Education and Families Manager  
(UK), RSPB  
Co-Chair of Link Education and  
Learning Policy Group

Replies can be sent to [lauren@wcl.org.uk](mailto:lauren@wcl.org.uk)

This letter is supported by the following organisations:

Amphibian and Reptile Conservation Trust  
Born Free Foundation  
British Ecological Society  
Chester Zoo  
Institute of Fisheries Management  
Marine Conservation Society  
Plantlife  
RSPB  
Seal Research Trust  
The Wildlife Trusts  
The Woodland Trust  
Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust  
ZSL

CC:

Catherine McKinnell MP, Minister of State (Minister for School Standards)  
Stephen Morgan MP, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State (Minister for Early Education)