



Play Commission Call for Evidence – Wildlife and Countryside Link Response

September 2024

This response is on behalf of nature and animal welfare coalition Wildlife and Countryside Link ([Link](#)). The response sets out how giving children greater access to nature can enhance play and learning.

How can we boost learning through play?

What is driving the decline of play opportunities in and around education, and how can this be turned around?

Indoor play is often associated with core curriculum and learning, such as English and maths subjects. By contrast, outdoor and nature play is often undervalued for its potential benefits for children’s wellbeing and cognitive development, and are seen as less essential than core subjects.¹

One study reported that 43% of surveyed parents rely on schools to ensure their children have sufficient time outdoors.² Coupled with the diminishing opportunities for outdoor play, children and young people are not receiving the multi-faceted benefits from accessing and connecting with nature through play. In general, barriers to time spent outdoors in education can be grouped into two main areas: school culture and teacher confidence.³ In addition, cultural changes over recent years such as increased parental control and fear (e.g., of traffic and adverse weather),⁴ inadequate access to outdoor playgrounds, and electronic screen time are contributing to the lack of nature play for children and young people.⁵

Teachers also face many pressures, high expectations, and conflicting priorities for their lessons. For example, the pressure of delivering the significant body of actions based around the National Curriculum results in many teachers choosing to take a more direct classroom-based approach to teaching, rather than utilising the outdoors.⁶

Out of 235 primary schools in England that were surveyed by Durrell Institute for Conservation and Ecology, 60.4% of schools reported that a lack of budget for school trips, particularly a budget for the cost of transport hire, limited the number of school-organised visits to natural sites. This suggests that

¹ Miranda, N., Larrea, I., Muela, A., & Barandiaran, A. (2017). Preschool children’s social play and involvement in the outdoor environment. *Early Education and Development*, 28(5), 525-540.

² University of Cambridge. (N.D.) The State of Play in the UK.

³ Scott, G. W., Boyd, M., Scott, L., & Colquhoun, D. (2015). Barriers to biological fieldwork: What really prevents teaching out of doors?. *Journal of Biological Education*, 49(2), 165-178.

⁴ Mart, M. (2021). Parental perceptions to outdoor activities. *International Journal of Progressive Education*, 17(4), 358-372.

⁵ Prins, J., van der Wilt, F., van der Veen, C., & Hovinga, D. (2022). Nature play in early childhood education: A systematic review and meta ethnography of qualitative research. *Frontiers in psychology*, 13, 995164.

⁶ Marchant, E., Todd, C., Cooksey, R., Dredge, S., Jones, H., Reynolds, D., ... & Brophy, S. (2019). Curriculum-based outdoor learning for children aged 9-11: A qualitative analysis of pupils’ and teachers’ views. *PloS one*, 14(5), e0212242.



the distance between schools and natural environments is also a limiting factor. For example, only 23.6% of primary schools that responded were within three kilometres of a nature reserve.⁷

Other limitations to outdoor play include teachers' lack of confidence in the methods for outdoor learning (55% of respondents). Additionally, 40% of teachers were concerned about the health and safety risks of outdoor play, whilst 55% felt that they had not received sufficient training for taking children outdoors.⁷

To combat the lack of outdoor and nature play within education, the Government must act. A statutory requirement should be introduced for every child to have regular high-quality access to and engagement with nature within education, through their curriculum. There must also be support mechanisms for teachers and schools to deliver outdoor learning across all education settings.⁸

The importance of training for teachers in play, and what resources teachers need to play

The role of teachers in outdoor and nature play is a significant contributor to the types of learning outcomes gained by children and the quality of play.⁹ In a hands-off approach where children can freely roam through nature, children take more risks, challenge themselves more, and engage in more socio-dramatic play. In comparison, during a hands-on approach with teacher-led activities, the teacher can direct children's attention toward objects for play and share more factual information.¹⁰ When teachers know how to mediate children's interactions with nature, time spent in nature has increasing value to a child's academic development.

At present, the importance of nature play is not fully recognised or prioritised in the school curriculum or on teacher training courses. Research undertaken by Students Organising for Sustainability (SOS) shows that 70% of UK teachers have not received adequate training to educate students on biodiversity loss and climate change, its implications for the environment and societies around the world, and how these implications can be combated.¹¹

To address these shortfalls, all teachers must be supported to embed nature, climate, and sustainability across the curriculum, and to connect children with nature, and feel confident in keeping children safe. Nature, climate, and sustainability should not be restricted to science and geography. Teachers across a range of subjects are increasingly being confronted with complex conversations with students that have big implications, and are made aware of existing misconceptions that children have about the natural world. Children and young people are accessing information on social media channels and need critical steer on determining what is true and what is false. All teachers must be equipped with a minimum standard of knowledge and capability to support children in their exploration of the subject, at each stage of learning.

⁷ Walker, E., Bormpoudakis, D., & Tzanopoulos, J. (2021). Assessing challenges and opportunities for schools' access to nature in England. *Urban Forestry & Urban Greening*, 61, 127097.

⁸ Wildlife and Countryside Link. (2024). A new statutory requirement for access to and engagement with nature within education.

⁹ Akpınar, Ü., & Kandır, A. (2022). Investigation of preschool teachers' views on outdoor play activities. *Pegem Journal of Education and Instruction*, 12(2), 235-245.

¹⁰ Mawson, W. B. (2014). Experiencing the 'wild woods': The impact of pedagogy on children's experience of a natural environment. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 22(4), 513-524.

¹¹Students Organising for Sustainability. (2021). Teacher training and climate education.



How education can make greater use of external environments to learn through play – including nature

Schools play a critical role in providing high-quality access to and engagement with nature for both teaching and play activities. There are three key options for providing children with opportunities for outdoor and nature play: natural areas within school grounds; visiting nearby green and blue spaces; and/or school trips to off-site nature reserves or similar.

The Government should introduce a statutory requirement for every child to have regular high-quality access to and engagement with nature within education, through their curriculum. Time must be spent in nature on a regular basis, whether as part of the curriculum on terrestrial, freshwater, and marine ecosystems or using nature as a learning setting.¹² Launching the new Natural History GCSE materials in 2025, for delivery in 2026, would supplement a rich education on the natural world and a much-needed connection to nature.¹³

Creating wild and natural areas within school grounds

Every educational establishment should be a place where children can access and play in nature every day, regardless of where they live (urban or rural) or their economic circumstances. School grounds should provide safe, high-quality spaces for children to learn and play in nature, alongside providing essential havens for wildlife to thrive. Based on evidence from the Children and Nature programme, school grounds improvements that are small in scale, easily maintained, and designed to be sustainable have the greatest impact and chance of longevity regardless of staff turnover and engagement.¹⁴ This accounts for the significant variety of school ground types across the UK, from larger pockets of land and playing fields, to concrete playgrounds in older Victorian settings.

Safe and low maintenance options for greening school grounds include planting trees and bushes, installing bee and bird boxes, creating raised beds, and leaving wild areas. One study revealed that increasing biodiversity and the amount of greenery of school playgrounds led to more explorative play, more multi-sensory play experiences, and better pre-academic skills (e.g., counting) than before the intervention.¹⁵

Equitable access to nature for play

Equitable access includes ensuring schools know how to access and resource the materials, kit, and equipment required to enable play and learning outdoors, such as wellington boots and waterproofs. This is especially important in underserved communities, to encourage and support parents and guardians to allow their children to participate with their peers.

Helping schools to provide equitable space for access to nature could be a key driver for improving the time spent and quality of nature play. Initiatives such as the National Education Nature Park

¹² Wildlife and Countryside Link. (2024). A new statutory requirement for access to and engagement with nature within education.

¹³ OCR. (2024). GCSE Natural History timeline – What happens next?

¹⁴ Natural England. (2023). Children & Nature Programme: the importance of integrating time spent in nature at school.

¹⁵ Puhakka, R., Rantala, O., Roslund, M. I., Rajaniemi, J., Laitinen, O. H., Sinkkonen, A., & ADELE Research Group. (2019). Greening of daycare yards with biodiverse materials affords well-being, play and environmental relationships. *International journal of environmental research and public health*, 16(16), 2948.



demonstrate the intent of the Government to bring children closer to nature as part of the school day, but it does not go far enough to ensure parity across the school estate. These schemes are “opt-in” and cannot guarantee that a school embeds outdoor play, learning and nature connection as a statutory element of school life once the programme has come to an end.

How do we expand places and environments where children can play?

The benefits that natural places to play bring to children

When children play in nature-based environments, the quality of play is improved. Nature-based environments typically produce more diversity in play actions compared to indoor play. At the same time, the duration of play episodes is extended and children’s involvement during play is also intensified whilst playing in nature-based environments.¹⁶ Playing outdoors has been shown to have the following multi-faceted benefits:

Physical benefits

- More outdoor time is linked with improved motor development including agility, balance and coordination, with benefits for children’s muscles, bones and physical endurance, and lowered risk of myopia (near-sightedness).¹⁷
- Children who play outside for longer have lower obesity rates and a lower Body Mass Index (BMI) than children who have limited playtime outdoors.¹⁸

Social-emotional competency

- Children who regularly play outside are generally more self-aware and have greater awareness of others’ feelings.¹⁹
- Children demonstrated a strong sense of comfort, self-confidence, and independence when playing in nature.²⁰

Mental health

- Outdoor play relieves physiological stress and restores mental fatigue, and children often report joy, wellbeing, and enthusiasm from playing in nature.²¹
- Time spent in natural settings reduces anger and aggression in children, whilst also improving impulse control.
- Children show increased focus, attention span, and reduced symptoms of Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) after playing in nature.

¹⁶ Prins, J., van der Wilt, F., van der Veen, C., & Hovinga, D. (2022). Nature play in early childhood education: A systematic review and meta ethnography of qualitative research. *Frontiers in psychology*, 13, 995164.

¹⁷ Gray, C., Gibbons, R., Larouche, R., Sandseter, E. B. H., Bienenstock, A., Brussoni, M., ... & Tremblay, M. S. (2015). What is the relationship between outdoor time and physical activity, sedentary behaviour, and physical fitness in children? A systematic review. *International journal of environmental research and public health*, 12(6), 6455-6474.

¹⁸ Ansari, A., Pettit, K., & Gershoff, E. (2015). Combating obesity in head start: outdoor play and change in children's body mass index. *Journal of Developmental & Behavioral Pediatrics*, 36(8), 605-612.

¹⁹ NprEd, (2014). Kids And Screen Time: What Does The Research Say?

²⁰University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point. (2023). Outdoor Education – Research Summary.

²¹ Gill, T. (2014). The benefits of children's engagement with nature: A systematic literature review. *Children Youth and Environments*, 24(2), 10-34.



- Children who grew up in areas with more greenspace have a lower risk of developing psychiatric disorders than their peers who did not.²²

Cognitive development

- Children who play outside are more likely to develop observational and reasoning skills, and experience more sensory engagement through exploration.
- Children are more engaged with learning and grow their critical thinking, curiosity, and creativity skills.²³
- Children and young people who regularly connect with and play in nature have been found to have higher achievement (in comparison to their peers or projected attainment) in reading, mathematics, science, and social studies. Longer term and 'progressive' experiences in nature result in the greatest benefits, and children with below average achievement have tended to make progress in learning outcomes to the greatest degree.

The safety concerns of parents and children, and potential solutions, of playing outside

Unsuitable or unsafe playgrounds remain a barrier to outdoor activity and play for children. Studies show that low perceived safety reduces the likelihood of some families using green and blue spaces. Decades of underinvestment have contributed to nearly 800 playgrounds in the UK facing closure since 2013.²⁴

Parks can be planned to encourage use by children and families. Having ample and strategically-placed lighting is critical for encouraging people to visit the city park. In some parks, access restrictions at gates to discourage antisocial behaviour (e.g., quad biking) inadvertently mean that parents cannot access spaces with pushchairs. Community engagement and consultation in the planning of new green and blue spaces or the retrofitting of existing green and blue spaces is essential to creating safer, inclusive spaces. More diverse lived experience in the planning and landscape architecture industries can also help bring an intersectional perspective into planning and design. We support the strengthening of Local Green Space designations to assist communities to protect their parks and green and blue spaces.

How to create 'child and family friendly' housing, design, and planning models that recognises the importance of playing out

The Environmental Improvement Plan (EIP) commits to providing all people with access to a green or blue space within a 15 minute walk of their home. This commitment also gives weight to, and complements, the wider set of access to greenspace standards in Natural England's Green Infrastructure Standards. In 2023, Natural England estimated that a third of English households do not have a natural space within 15 minutes' walk. Greater use of the Green Infrastructure Standards will help address this.²⁵

²² Engemann, K., Pedersen, C. B., Arge, L., Tsirogiannis, C., Mortensen, P. B., & Svenning, J. C. (2019). Residential green space in childhood is associated with lower risk of psychiatric disorders from adolescence into adulthood. *Proceedings of the national academy of sciences*, 116(11), 5188-5193.

²³ Kuo, M., Browning, M. H., & Penner, M. L. (2018). Do lessons in nature boost subsequent classroom engagement? Refueling students in flight. *Frontiers in psychology*, 8, 2253.

²⁴ Fields in Trust. (2024). New UK government 'must address play crisis' as a third of children in Britain do not have access to any nearby playgrounds.

²⁵ Natural England. (2023). Natural England unveils new Green Infrastructure Framework. Press release.



To deliver this 15 minute commitment, and secure greater deployment of the Green Infrastructure Standards, the Government must set a legally-binding target for access to nature, which would drive cross-Government action and investment. A legally binding target to provide access to high quality green and blue spaces for all people within a 15 minute walk of their home could be set under the powers given to Ministers under the Environment Act 2021.

To meet the 15 minute commitment, a national strategic plan for access to nature must set out how the Government will deliver on its target, including policies, actions, and required funding. All new developments must be required to strategically plan and design for all children and families to have equitable nature access. Local Green and Blue Infrastructure Strategies (as described in Natural England's Green Infrastructure Standards) could play a helpful role by extending public access rights to waterways, woodland, riversides, and grasslands.

All of these recommendations should be closely considered through the Government's review of the Environmental Improvement Plan in autumn 2024.

The public rights of way network in England is a unique and world class recreational resource that is a fundamental way for children and adults alike to access nature. We need further funding for local authorities to maintain, improve and create more public rights of way to facilitate access to nature. Safe walking routes provides ways in which young people can access nature, removing non-structural barriers to activity and play in natural spaces. This also applies to maintaining, protecting, and expanding urban green routes. Despite their wide appeal and contribution to child and adult wellbeing, there is still no dedicated central government funding pot to maintain, protect and expand them.

Reducing inequalities in access to nature for play

Housing and planning design must boost the equitable access to green and blue spaces, parks, and playgrounds. Acting on the 15 minute commitment could reduce access inequalities across income, ethnicity, ability, and region, and give more children the opportunity to benefit from playing outdoors.

The most deprived communities in England (as ranked in England's index of multiple deprivation) are more than twice as likely as wealthy communities to live in areas with a low amount of natural space per person.²⁶ A Black, Asian or minority ethnic person is twice as likely as a white person to live in an area in England that is most deprived of green space.²⁷

There are also disparities in the provision of public green and blue space across regions in England. The regions with the lowest quality parks are Yorkshire and the Humber, the North West, the North East, and the West Midlands, according to the State of UK Parks Report 2021.²⁸ The Fields in Trust Green Space Index found that the North East and London had the poorest access to green space, while the South East of England had the best access to green space.²⁹

²⁶ Wildlife and Countryside Link. (2023). Mapping access to nature in England.

²⁷ Friends of the Earth. (2020). England's green space gap.

²⁸ Association for Public Service Excellence. (2021). State of UK Public Parks 2021.

²⁹ Fields in Trust. (N.D.) Green space index.



These economic, ethnic and regional disparities in access to nature for play are a hinderance to equal opportunity, the economy, and the ability of many young people to connect with the natural world. Addressing the disparities will require a cross-government combination of better planning, investment in the quality of green and blue space, and a renewed focus on nature in education.

National Planning Policy Framework

The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) must acknowledge the value of some proposed development land, such as 'grey belt' sites, as land for recreation and play. Similarly, Green Belt land offers key opportunities for accessing and engaging with nature. As currently set out in recent proposed reforms to the NPPF,³⁰ there are some high-performing areas of Green Belt which will meet the definition of grey belt. One example of at-risk land is 'urban land use', which could include parks, playing fields and recreation grounds. These provide important opportunities for children to play outdoors and would be at risk of development.

Similar considerations should be made for brownfield sites. These sites can provide the last wild green and blue space in urban areas, allowing children to access and play in nature and consequently receive the multi-faceted benefits. Sites should be assessed for their value and potential value for biodiversity and local communities on a case-by-case basis, rather than on land classification such as 'urban land use' or 'previously developed land'.

Wildlife and Countryside Link (Link) is the largest nature coalition in England, bringing together 86 organisations to use their joint voice for the protection of the natural world and animals.

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The following organisations have inputted into this response:

Hare Preservation Trust

Open Spaces Society

Paddle UK

Plantlife

RSPB

The Ramblers

The Wildlife Trusts

Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust

³⁰ Ministry of Housing, Communities, and Local Government. (2024). Open Consultation: Proposed reforms to the National Planning Policy Framework and other changes to the planning system