

Sowing the Seeds: Reconnecting London's Children with Nature



Executive summary

This report* was commissioned by the London Sustainable Development Commission to explore how children in London can be reconnected with nature, and the benefits that may be experienced as a result. The report focuses on children under the age of 12 and on nature that has the potential to be experienced as part of children's everyday lives (rather than in one-off residential trips or adventure activities).

Most children have a natural affinity with nature. Surveys consistently show that they would like to get outdoors more, and that they value the chance to have contact with nature; views that are also held by their parents. Two thirds of London's area is made up of green spaces or water, and ten per cent is designated as Metropolitan Open Land, yet children's experiences of natural places in the capital have been in long-term decline, as a result of societal changes that have been unfolding for many years. This decline is steeper for children in poorer families and some Black and Minority Ethnic Groups. Children in London face additional barriers compared to those in many other parts of the UK, as a result of high population densities, pressure on green space, deficiencies in green space in many areas and poorer access to private gardens.

Many of London's children depend for their experiences of nature on the work of a range of organisations. Research found initiatives taking place in schools, early years and childcare settings, parks and green spaces, woodlands, nature reserves, adventure playgrounds and city farms. They vary widely in scope, reach and cost (see Table ES1). However, the fieldwork confirmed that collectively they reach only a small proportion of the capital's 1.1 million children under the age of 12: potentially as low as 4 per cent**.

A review of empirical studies was carried out, which found good evidence for a range of benefits arising from children spending time in nature. Contact with nature can be seen as part of a 'balanced diet' of childhood experiences that promotes children's healthy development, well-being and positive environmental attitudes and values.

The literature review also found evidence that the benefits of more play-oriented engagement - through free play, exploration, leisure activities and child-initiated learning - were particularly significant. Consequently, this report focuses on the goal of offering children 'engaging everyday nature experiences' - defined as experiences that involve repeated visits to the same site, and give children exploratory, play-oriented, hands-on contact with nature, not just didactic or curriculum-oriented activities.

Initiatives are fragmented, and grappling with complex issues and challenges. These include parental and public attitudes, diversity and inclusion, funding, planning issues, qualities and characteristics of sites, different philosophies and styles of delivery, risk management, learning outside the classroom agendas and marketing and promotion.

This report puts forward 12 draft recommendations (see Table ES2) to address these issues, and to make contact with nature a part of everyday life for more of London's children. The first, fundamental recommendation is to establish a shared vision. Recommendations 2 – 6 focus on policy and strategy developments to achieve this vision. Recommendations 7 – 12 suggest ways of supporting practice and delivery. These recommendations, listed in Table 2 below, are designed to catalyse action that can be started now, but with the timeframe of a generation or more in mind.

* Full Report available by agreement from lsdc@london.gov.uk

** This figure does not include data about children and families' independent visits to natural areas in parks and other publicly accessible natural green spaces. However, the 4 per cent figure is of value as a baseline statistic, as it shows the number of children that we can be confident are gaining engaging everyday nature experiences.

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Table ES1: Interventions compared

	School grounds project	Forest school programme	Programme at staffed nature reserve	Natural play at adventure playground	Natural public play space	Programme at city farm	After school nature club	Programme at Cubs/ Brownies/ Woodcraft	Programme at unstaffed nature area
Style/s of engagement	Formal & informal learning; play	Child-initiated learning	Formal & informal learning; play	Play	Play	Structured activities; play	Informal learning; structured activities	Games; structured activities	Formal & informal learning; play
No. of possible sites/ settings in London	1900 inc nurseries	1900	40 - 80	80	1000s	16	1000	1500	100 - 500
No. of existing examples in London	50-100	100-150	40 - 80	25	10-20	16	10	Hard to estimate	Hard to estimate
Current numbers of children enjoying engaging everyday nature experiences	10000-20000	5000-7500	Hard to estimate	10000	500-1000	Hard to estimate	200	Hard to estimate	Hard to estimate
Comparative cost of extending such experiences to 100 more children for 10 years	£20k-£50k & £5k-£50k upkeep	£4k start-up & £1k-£100k revenue	£180k	£12k	£100k & £10k upkeep	£30k	£35k	Unclear - some training & support	£145k
Scope for expansion (Low/Med/High)	Medium	High	Medium	Low	Low	Low	Unclear	Unclear	Medium
Scope for geographical targeting (Low/Med/High)	High	High	Low	Low	High	Low	High	Medium	Medium
Key constraints on expansion (aside from funding)	Lack of understanding of benefits; upkeep & liability	Suitable interested staff & settings	No. & resilience of suitable sites	No. of suitable sites	Upkeep & liability concerns	No. of suitable sites	Unclear level of interest	Finding suitable sites; unclear level of interest	No. & resilience of suitable sites

Table ES2: Draft Recommendations 1 – 6 (vision, policy and strategy)

Recommendation	Key organisations
<p>1: Adopt a clear vision Lead organisations should establish a shared vision that all children under 12 in London have good access to sites where they can experience nature as part of their everyday lives and have engaging everyday nature experiences in such a site, beginning in their pre-school years.</p>	<p>London Sustainable Development Commission, Greater London Authority/Mayor, key partners</p>
<p>2: Create a London wide partnership A London wide partnership on children and nature should be created to work towards the vision set out above.</p>	<p>London Sustainable Development Commission, Greater London Authority/Mayor, key partners</p>
<p>3: Embed children and nature aims in relevant London wide policies and strategies The presence of the outdoor child should be seen as one indicator of site significance, and more broadly as a measure of environmental value. London’s planning system and relevant strategy documents should be reviewed to explore the implications of this position.</p>	<p>Greater London Authority (including Children & Young People’s Unit), London Borough planning departments, Transport for London, London wide health and education sector organisations, London Wildlife Trust, London Biodiversity Partnership</p>
<p>4: Identify geographical priorities using new GIS analyses New GIS analyses should be carried out to identify geographical priorities for action, taking better account of the types of space that could benefit children, children’s more limited mobility, and relevant population data.</p>	<p>Greater London Authority, Greenspace Information for Greater London, London Boroughs</p>
<p>5: Measure progress and set goals to drive delivery Key organisations should take forward discussions with interested parties in a range of sectors to draw up appropriate cross-sectoral milestones and performance measures to drive engagement and delivery.</p>	<p>London Sustainable Development Commission, Greater London Authority/Mayor, key partners</p>
<p>6: Pilot health interventions for targeted groups of children Pilot preventative and therapeutic programmes should be initiated and evaluated, targeted at specific groups of children with support from health organisations.</p>	<p>Greater London Authority (including Children and Young People’s Unit), London health sector organisations</p>

Table ES2 continued: Draft Recommendations 7 – 12 (practice and delivery)

Recommendation	Key organisations
<p>7: Promote hands-on, play-oriented experiences and interventions Those working in and managing sites where children come into contact with nature should maximise opportunities to provide exploratory, hands-on, play-oriented experiences.</p>	<p>Nature conservation organisations, landowners & managers, Registered Social Landlords, London Play, adventure playgrounds, London Borough parks departments, 'Friends of' groups</p>
<p>8: Promote better use of accessible green space Programmes should be initiated and evaluated that promote the use of under-used accessible green space by organised groups and the public.</p>	<p>Nature conservation organisations, London Borough parks departments, Greenspace Information for Greater London, community and youth groups, landowners & managers, Registered Social Landlords, London Play, British Trust for Conservation Volunteers</p>
<p>9: Promote forest school Forest school and similar approaches to learning in the outdoors should be promoted and supported London wide to the conservation, education and childcare sectors.</p>	<p>Key partners, London Borough education departments, London wide and Borough childcare organisations, forest school organisations, nature conservation organisations</p>
<p>10: Promote engaging everyday nature experiences in school grounds Schools and early years settings should give greater emphasis to offering children engaging everyday nature experiences.</p>	<p>Educational settings, Learning through Landscapes</p>
<p>11: Promote risk-benefit assessment Risk-benefit assessment should be promoted as the appropriate approach to managing risk in settings and locations where children's engagement with nature is being encouraged.</p>	<p>London Boroughs, London Play, London Parks and Green Spaces Forum, landowners, schools, education and childcare providers, nature conservation organisations, insurers</p>
<p>12: Promote children's participation Children should be involved in developing initiatives, and should be given the chance to influence policy priorities.</p>	<p>Greater London Authority (including Children and Young People's Unit), key partners, delivery organisations</p>