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 curriculumoriented 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

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	should be initiated and evaluated, targeted at	sector organisations
health organisations.	specific groups of children with support from	-
	health organisations.	

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



Recommendation	Key organisations
7: Promote hands-on, play-oriented	Nature conservation
experiences and interventions	organisations, landowners &
	U
Those working in and managing sites where	managers, Registered Social
children come into contact with nature should	Landlords, London Play,
maximise opportunities to provide exploratory,	adventure playgrounds, London
hands-on, play-oriented experiences.	Borough parks departments,
	'Friends of' groups
8: Promote better use of accessible green	Nature conservation
space	organisations, London Borough
Programmes should be initiated and evaluated	parks departments, Greenspace
that promote the use of under-used accessible	Information for Greater London,
green space by organised groups and the public.	community and youth groups,
	landowners & managers,
	Registered Social Landlords,
	London Play, British Trust for
	Conservation Volunteers
9: Promote forest school	Key partners, London Borough
Forest school and similar approaches to learning	education departments, London
in the outdoors should be promoted and	wide and Borough childcare
supported London wide to the conservation,	organisations, forest school
education and childcare sectors.	organisations, nature
	conservation organisations
10: Promote engaging everyday nature	Educational settings, Learning
experiences in school grounds	through Landscapes
Schools and early years settings should give	
greater emphasis to offering children engaging	
everyday nature experiences.	
11: Promote risk-benefit assessment	London Boroughs, London Play,
Risk-benefit assessment should be promoted as	London Parks and Green Spaces
the appropriate approach to managing risk in	Forum, landowners, schools,
settings and locations where children's	education and childcare
engagement with nature is being encouraged.	providers, nature conservation
	organisations, insurers
12: Promote children's participation	Greater London Authority
Children should be involved in developing	(including Children and Young
initiatives, and should be given the chance to	People's Unit), key partners,
influence policy priorities.	delivery organisations
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Table ES2 continued: Draft Recommendations 7 – 12 (practice and delivery)

