



# NATURAL CONNECTIONS DEMONSTRATION PROJECT

SUSTAINABILITY  
REPORT  
JANUARY 2018

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# 1. Introduction

The Natural Connections Demonstration Project (NCDP) was funded by Natural England, Defra and Historic England and delivered by Plymouth University. It was shaped in the light of discussions with teachers and school leaders, who reported that the challenges they faced in relation to outdoor learning were local and school based, and related to their own confidence and skills in taking lessons outside. These underpinned the more traditionally cited challenges of curriculum pressure and concern about risks and cost.

NCDP was established to pilot and evaluate new ways of providing local, independent support to schools and teachers to encourage demand for outdoor learning. The aim of the project was to increase the number of school children, particularly from disadvantaged communities, experiencing the benefits of the local natural environment by empowering teachers to use the outdoors to support everyday learning. The project had three key aims, which were to:

- stimulate the demand from schools and teachers for learning outside the classroom in the local natural environment.
- support schools and teachers to build learning outside the classroom in the local natural environment into their planning and practices.
- stimulate the supply of high quality learning outside the classroom in the natural environment services for schools and teachers.

Between 2012-2016 the NCDP worked with over 125 schools, 40,000 pupils (Key Stages 1-4) and 2,500 teachers across the South West. Through a distributed model of responsibility, the project supported schools and teachers to help them build outdoor learning into their everyday planning and practices.

NCDP has shown that it is possible for school grounds and local greenspaces to be used daily to enhance teaching and learning across the curriculum and to deliver a wide range of associated benefits. These include developing children's social and emotional skills and their engagement with learning. The project also found that the major challenges to outdoor learning, such as staff confidence in teaching outside and uncertainty how to deliver the curriculum through outdoor learning, can be overcome by enabling teachers and schools to work with and learn from each other.

The purpose of this two-year follow up survey was to test the sustainability of outdoor learning practice and delivery in the participating schools. The key question examined through an elective online survey with participating schools was: had schools increased, decreased or maintained their involvement with outdoor learning two years after participating in NCDP?

## 2. Key Points

The NCDP evaluation (see Key Evaluation Question 5) reported hub leaders' views on school recruitment to the project. Hub leaders argued that schools' 'philosophical' engagement with outdoor learning was an important precursor to raising levels of activity, and that it then took time to raise staff levels of confidence so that they would engage regularly with outdoor learning activities<sup>1</sup>. The findings from the 2017 survey, in which higher levels of staff engagement are seen together with the development of new and innovative practice, uphold this view. This offers strong support for the sustainability of outdoor learning and its benefits in the 38 responding schools.

Key points:

- Schools' levels of engagement with each of six outdoor learning investment criteria (outlined in Section 4) were variable, but overall levels of school investment in outdoor learning appeared to be sustained and strengthened. The investment criteria are not a validated measurement, but give a helpful indication of schools' levels of commitment and activity.
- The number of schools that have over 50 per cent of teachers involved in outdoor learning rose from 13 (41 per cent) to 24 (75 per cent) between completing the baseline and July 2017 surveys; the number of schools that have over 50 per cent of Teaching Assistants (TAs) involved in outdoor learning has risen from 10 (31 per cent) to 25 (78 per cent) between completing the baseline and July 2017 surveys. Both these measures are strong indicators of the sustainability of outdoor learning in these schools, particularly in the current climate of funding reductions and reduced staffing levels.
- Schools have continued to invest in outdoor learning from their budgets and to attract other types of funding and/or practical support.
- Schools seem to be investing as and when necessary to sustain consistent outdoor learning activities. Most responding schools reported maintenance and/or improvement to their grounds, but there was an overall reduction in levels of continuing professional development (CPD) activity. This may signify greater staff confidence, both in their own outdoor learning delivery and in the benefits that it brings to pupils, that is demonstrated by greater ambition and experimentation in developing school grounds.
- 33 respondents (n=38) agreed that outdoor learning was 'very important' or 'important' in their schools. The main reasons for its importance were related to supporting children's learning, providing new or 'real' experiences, and supporting health and wellbeing.
- Respondents reported a number of successes with the development of outdoor learning in their schools that included a thriving Forest School programme, cases in which outdoor learning has particularly helped some pupils, obtaining quality badges and greater resources allocated to outdoor learning for the academic year 2017/18. The wide range of different developments reported indicates that schools are developing outdoor learning practice to meet their own needs rather than following set patterns of development.
- Primary schools continued to report higher investment in outdoor learning than secondary schools.

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<sup>1</sup> Gilchrist, M., Passy, R., Waite, S., Blackwell, I., Edwards-Jones, A., Lewis, J. & Hunt, A. (2017) *Natural Connections Demonstration Project, 2012-2016: Analysis of the key evaluation questions*, Natural England Commissioned Reports, Number 215 Annex 1. York, p.185.

### 3. Research approach

In 2016 and 2017, all 125 schools that had been involved in the project evaluation were invited to complete a short online survey that asked about their continuing engagement with outdoor learning. There was a considerable fall in the number of schools who submitted completed surveys after their engagement with the project ended in 2015. However, thirty-five schools (28 per cent) responded in 2016 and 38 schools (30 per cent) in 2017.

Table 1 below shows these responses in relation to the other surveys run during NCDP. Six schools responded to all five surveys; 18 to four surveys; 34 to three surveys and 37 to two surveys. Of the 125 schools included in the survey invitations, 121 completed a baseline; one of the schools that completed the July 2016 and 2017 surveys did not return a baseline survey.

Baseline surveys were completed when schools joined the project, which varied between March 2013 and April 2015.

**Table 1: Summary of number of schools responding to NCDP surveys**

Survey	Baseline (March 2013 – April 2015)	July 2014	July 2015	July 2016	July 2017	
School respondents	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	6
School respondents	✓		✓	✓	✓	18
School respondents	✓		✓		✓	34
School respondents	✓				✓	37
<b>Total surveys returned</b>	121	28	87	35	38	

Section 4 of this report covers changes in investment in outdoor learning in the 38 schools (highlighted in orange in Table 1) that returned the 2017 survey, following the model of the Key Evaluation Question (KEQ) 5<sup>2</sup>. Attention is then focused on data from the 34 schools that completed the baseline, July 2015 and July 2017 surveys (highlighted in green in Table 1), reporting on a longitudinal analysis of the development of outdoor learning in these schools. The relatively small numbers mean that no statistical tests have been conducted on the 2017 data and that the research does not claim to be representative of all schools that participated in the project. Our analysis is nonetheless informed by interviews with hub leaders during the project and in July 2016.

Hub leaders were not interviewed in 2017; two hub leaders retired in 2016 and were no longer active in their areas (Cornwall and Torbay), two hubs (Bristol and North Somerset) had amalgamated

<sup>2</sup> Gilchrist, M., Passy, R., Waite, S., Blackwell, I., Edwards-Jones, A., Lewis, J. & Hunt, A. (2017) *Natural Connections Demonstration Project, 2012-2016: Analysis of the key evaluation questions*, Natural England Commissioned Reports, Number 215 Annex 1. York, pp.180-191.

and outdoor learning was supported as part of a larger Learning Everywhere initiative <http://learningeverywhere.co.uk/>. The Plymouth hub leader still supported outdoor learning through the provision of greenspace.

Finally, Appendix 1 reports on the qualitative data from the survey, illustrating the successes and challenges experienced by schools during the academic year 2016/7.

### 3.1 Assessing school investment

The model of KEQ5 was followed in this report to assess changes in the levels of school's commitment to outdoor learning in the two years after their participation in NCDP came to an end. The same six criteria that could be considered indicative of a school's investment in outdoor learning (see below) were compared in the 38 responding schools (30 primary, four secondary, four special) from the NCDP project lifetime and the 2017 survey. When assessing schools' investment, the criteria should be examined as a whole to gain an overall picture of the sustainability of outdoor learning in individual schools.

Understanding school involvement is complex because of schools' different approaches, levels of commitment to and models of outdoor learning; the criteria used offer an indication of different ways in which they have engaged rather than a definitive measurement. As was the case in the report for KEQ 5 in the NCDP evaluation, which looked at whether schools considered that investment in outdoor learning was time and money well spent, the focus is on six criteria that represent school investment in outdoor learning in terms of action (e.g. staff time), strategic investment (e.g. school documentation), resource investment (e.g. budget spend) and ongoing commitment (e.g. continuing professional development). These criteria are:

- the proportion of teachers involved in outdoor learning
- the proportion of TAs involved in outdoor learning
- school documentation related to outdoor learning
- CPD undertaken by school staff or volunteers
- school budget spend on outdoor learning
- development of school grounds to enable outdoor learning.

Using these six criteria, schools were categorised into three groups according to their relative levels of investment in outdoor learning: low investment for schools that had met either zero, one or two criteria; medium investment for schools that met three or four criteria; and high for those schools that reported five or all six investment criteria.

## 4. Schools' investment in outdoor learning

This section first examines the data from the 38 schools (30 primary, four secondary, four special) that responded to the 2017 survey to assess overall school investment in learning outdoors. It then reports on the six individual criteria that form the overall assessment from the 34 schools (27 primary, four secondary, three special) that completed the baseline, 2015 and 2017 surveys.

### 4.1. Results

Table 2 compares the number of investment criteria achieved in 38 schools at the end of NCDP and two years later in 2017. Schools have then been grouped according to changes in their levels of investment in outdoor learning over this two-year period as either positive (green); no change (orange), or a negative change (red). Thirty from 38 responding schools either increased (18) or maintained (12) their levels of investment in the outdoor learning over the two years from the end of NCDP. The sustained high investment in outdoor learning from a majority of these schools, in which 23 fulfil five or six criteria, is a strong indicator of the sustainability of outdoor learning in the longer term.

**Table 2: Changes in school investment in outdoor learning**

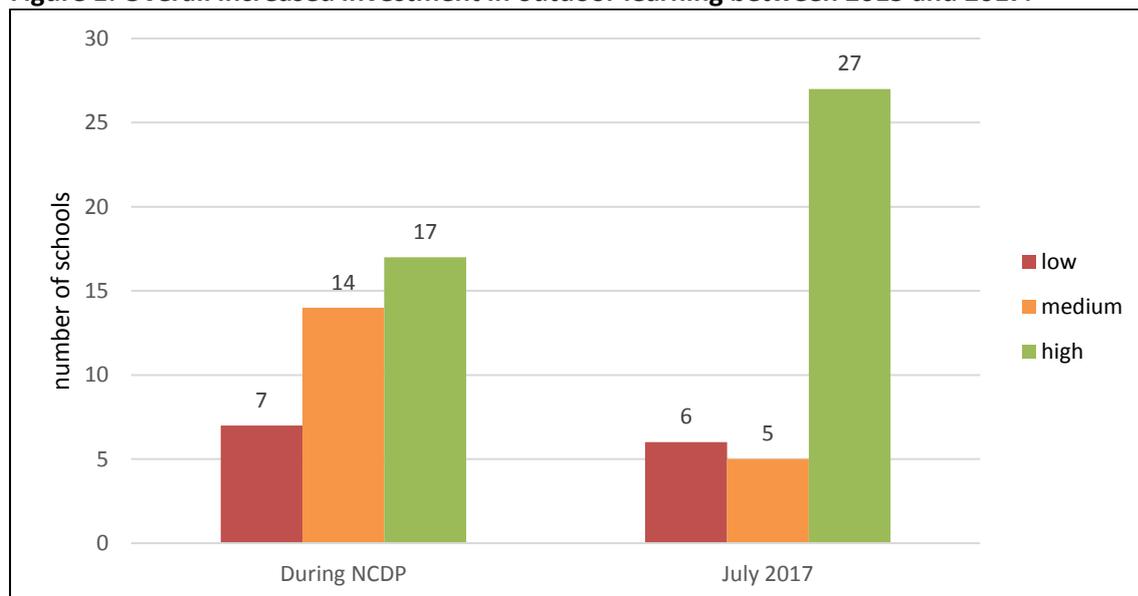
School sector	During NCDP	July 2017	Change
Primary	5	6	
Primary	4	6	
Primary	3	6	
Primary	2	6	
Primary	1	6	
Primary	4	5	
Primary	4	5	
Special School	4	5	
Primary	2	5	
Special School	2	5	
Primary	3	4	
Primary	3	4	
Primary	3	4	
Primary	1	4	
Secondary School	1	2	
Primary	6	6	
Primary	6	6	
Special School	6	6	
Primary	6	6	
Primary	6	6	
Primary	5	5	

Primary	5	5	Yellow
Primary	5	5	Yellow
Primary	5	5	Yellow
Primary	4	4	Yellow
Primary	3	3	Yellow
Special School	3	3	Yellow
Primary	6	5	Red
Primary	6	3	Red
Primary	6	2	Red
Secondary School	5	2	Red
Primary	4	3	Red
Secondary School	4	1	Red
Primary	3	1	Red
Secondary School	2	1	Red

All four secondary schools have relatively low levels of investment according to these criteria. The NCDP evaluation<sup>3</sup> suggested this could be related to the difficulties of embedding outdoor learning across a large number of staff and students compared to primary schools, and could be seen in the context of shifting curricular and examination demands.

Figure 1 shows the change in numbers of schools reporting particular levels of investment according to these criteria. There are increases in the number of schools reporting high levels of investment (17 to 27; 45 to 71 per cent) and decreases in the number of schools reporting medium (14 to five; 37 to 13 per cent) and low (seven to six; 18 to 16 per cent) levels of investment

**Figure 1: Overall increased investment in outdoor learning between 2015 and 2017.**



n=38

<sup>3</sup> Gilchrist, M., Passy, R., Waite, S., Blackwell, I., Edwards-Jones, A., Lewis, J. & Hunt, A. (2017) *Natural Connections Demonstration Project, 2012-2016: Analysis of the key evaluation questions*, Natural England Commissioned Reports, Number 215 Annex 1. York, pp.180-191.

The following sub-sections report on the data from the 34 schools that completed the baseline, July 2015 and July 2017 surveys.

#### 4.2. School staff involvement with outdoor learning

Table 3 shows the percentage of teachers and TAs who were involved with outdoor learning across 32 schools in the baseline, July 2015 and July 2017 surveys (of the 34 schools returning data for the baseline, July 2015 and 2017 survey, one school did not complete the data for this question in July 2017 and one in July 2015).

Teacher involvement in outdoor learning rose from 31 per cent (n=236) in the baseline survey to 56 per cent (n=416) at the end-of-project survey in July 2015, falling slightly to 50 per cent (n=332) in July 2017. TA involvement rose steadily from 36 per cent (n=635) in the baseline survey to 54 (n=609) in July 2015 to 70 per cent (n=581) in July 2017.

There was a substantial reduction in the reported total number of both teachers and TAs in these 32 schools between the baseline survey and the 2017 survey (103 teachers and 54 TAs). It is interesting to note that over this period the reduction in the proportion of teachers involved in outdoor learning coincided with an increase in the proportion of TAs involved in outdoor learning, which suggests that some schools may be transferring responsibility from teachers to TAs.

**Table 3: Teacher and TA involvement in outdoor learning (OL)**

	<b>Baseline</b>	<b>July 2015</b>	<b>July 2017</b>
<b>No. of teachers in responding schools</b>	762	740	659
<b>Proportion of teachers involved with OL</b>	31% (236)	56% (416)	50% (332)
<b>No. of TAs in responding schools</b>	635	609	581
<b>Proportion of TAs involved with OL</b>	36% (230)	59% (362)	70% (406)

n=32 schools (one school did not complete this question in July 2017 and one in July 2015)

Table 4 below shows the proportion of schools that have over 50 per cent of teachers and over 50 per cent of TAs involved in outdoor learning. The Table shows a steady increase in the number of schools that have over 50 per cent of teachers involved in outdoor learning (13 to 24; from 41 to 75 per cent) across these 32 schools between the baseline and 2017 surveys, and an increase (10 to 25; from 31 to 78 per cent) in the proportion of schools in which over 50 per cent of TAs are involved. This is highly encouraging in the context of the reduction in overall staff numbers. Given the continuing pressure on schools' resourcing, it is fair to assume that schools and teachers would not undertake outdoor learning unless they saw and understood the benefits it can have for their pupils.

**Table 4: Schools with over 50 per cent of staff involved in outdoor learning**

	Baseline	July 2015	July 2017
<b>Schools with over 50 per cent of teachers involved in outdoor learning</b>	13 (41%)	21 (66%)	24 (75%)
<b>Schools with over 50 per cent of TAs involved in outdoor learning</b>	10 (31%)	17 (53%)	25 (78%)

n=32 schools (one school did not complete the question in the July 2017 survey and one in July 2015)

When viewing these tables, it is important to remember that the data include four secondary schools that employ relatively high numbers of teachers (between 50 – 85) and four special schools that employ relatively high numbers of TAs (between 15 – 65). When the 25 primary schools that returned data in all three surveys for staff involvement are examined on their own, the picture is particularly encouraging (shown in Table 5).

**Table 5: Primary school teacher and TA involvement in outdoor learning**

	Baseline	July 2015	July 2017
<b>No. of teachers in responding schools</b>	400	421	375
<b>Proportion of teachers involved with OL</b>	40% (160)	73% (307)	74% (278)
<b>No. of TAs in responding schools</b>	496	526	444
<b>Proportion of TAs involved with OL</b>	35% (176)	59% (312)	74% (329)
<b>Number of schools with over 50% of teachers involved in outdoor learning</b>	11/25	18/25	21/25
<b>Number of schools with over 50% of TAs involved in outdoor learning</b>	7/25	15/25	22/25

n=25 primary schools (one school did not complete the question in the July 2017 survey and one in July 2015)

### 4.3. School documentation

Table 6 shows the responses to the school documentation questions from the 34 schools that participated in the baseline, July 2015 and July 2017 surveys. Including outdoor learning in school documentation can be used as a proxy measure for a strategic school approach to outdoor learning that is supported by the school's Senior Leadership Team, and generally includes information about the rationale for outdoor learning, resource allocations and/or a commitment to regular practice.

**Table 6: School documentation**

	<b>Baseline</b>	<b>July 2015</b>	<b>July 2017</b>
<b>Schools with outdoor learning policy</b>	18 (53%)	16 (47%)	19 (56%)
<b>Schools with outdoor learning referenced in school documentation</b>	22 (65%)	24 (71%)	24 (71%)
<b>Schools with either outdoor learning policies / outdoor learning referenced in documentation</b>	29 (85%)	29 (85%)	27 (79%)

n=34

The number of schools with an outdoor learning policy has remained relatively steady, as has the number of schools that reference outdoor learning in other school documentation. The number of schools that reported either an outdoor learning policy or referencing outdoor learning in school documents remains high at 27 (79 per cent), but is a slight decrease from the 29 (85 per cent) recorded in both the baseline and July 2015 school surveys.

Hub leaders worked closely with schools to develop documentation in schools initially recruited to NCDP in order to provide legitimacy for subsequent activity, and so this documentation was often in place before other investment in outdoor learning increased.

#### 4.4. School engagement with outdoor learning continuing professional development

Table 7 shows the changes in the 34 responding schools' engagement with outdoor learning CPD. Outdoor learning-related CPD was an integral part of NCDP that had the aim of raising teachers' knowledge of and confidence in teaching their lessons outside; it was used as one of the criteria for estimating schools' investment in outdoor learning because it demonstrates medium- or long-term commitment to developing staff knowledge and expertise.

In the baseline survey schools were asked about CPD undertaken in the previous 12 months, and in the 2015 and 2017 surveys they were asked about CPD undertaken in the previous academic year. The table shows that 19 (56 per cent) schools reported outdoor learning CPD activity in the baseline survey; this rose to 26 (76 per cent) in July 2015 but decreased to 18 (53 per cent) in July 2017. In the evaluation of NCDP<sup>4</sup> it was reported that schools' CPD needs changed according to the development of their outdoor learning practice, changing school priorities and local/national policy demands, and it is possible that fewer schools engaged in CPD in 2017 because of increased confidence in their practice during the two years since the end of the project, smaller CPD budgets and more informal

<sup>4</sup> Gilchrist, M., Passy, R., Waite, S., Blackwell, I., Edwards-Jones, A., Lewis, J. & Hunt, A. (2017) *Natural Connections Demonstration Project, 2012-2016: Analysis of the key evaluation questions*, Natural England Commissioned Reports, Number 215 Annex 1. York, p.254.

training within schools. The variation in CPD activity reported is once again likely to indicate that schools respond to their own outdoor learning needs rather than following set patterns of activity.

**Table 7: School engagement with outdoor learning CPD**

	Baseline	July 2015	July 2017
<b>Schools in which staff / volunteers have undertaken OL CPD in the previous academic year / 12 months</b>	19 (56%)	26 (76%)	18 (53%)

n=34

#### 4.5. School spend on outdoor learning

Table 8 shows the proportion of the 34 responding schools to the July 2015 and 2017 surveys that spend budgetary funds on outdoor learning. This was selected as a criterion for estimating schools' investment in outdoor learning as it is directly linked to the headteacher's and Senior Leadership Team's support for outdoor learning. The Table shows an increase in the number of schools that reported spending school budget on outdoor learning from 22 (65 per cent) to 27 (79 per cent) between 2015-2017. In the evaluation of NCDP<sup>5</sup> it was reported that outdoor learning could be relatively low cost once the school grounds were established and other resources procured, and continuing to invest for two years beyond the end of NCDP demonstrates that these schools remain committed to updating their outdoor learning resources and providing their pupils with outdoor learning activities. Placing financial value on the contribution that outdoor learning brings to the school also reflects that outdoor learning activities are becoming increasingly embedded in everyday school priorities and practice. During a period of increasing pressure on schools both in terms of resourcing and the results they are expected to demonstrate, this continuation in investment in outdoor learning again shows the value that it has for practice and the subsequent benefits for pupils.

**Table 8: school spend on outdoor learning**

	Baseline	July 2015	July 2017
<b>Schools spending money from the school budget on outdoor learning</b>	n/a	22 (65%)	27 (79%)

n=34

Schools were also encouraged during the NCDP to seek other types of financial or practical support for outdoor learning. Table 9 shows that the number of schools receiving external funding or in-kind support for outdoor learning has remained relatively stable. This is encouraging in the context of schools' fluctuating need for funding and support for maintaining and improving outdoor learning areas and renewing resources such as outdoor clothing.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p.189

**Table 9: Sources of support for outdoor learning**

	Baseline	July 2015	July 2017
<b>Schools receiving external funding or in-kind support for outdoor learning</b>	n/a	18 (53%)	19 (56%)

n=34

Table 10 shows the types of external support that 19 schools reported receiving in 2017. Most of the support came from grant funding (16 schools), followed by in-kind labour or materials (10 schools). Attracting grant funding and/or sponsorship takes time and effort, another indication of schools' continuing commitment to outdoor learning.

**Table 10: Type of support received by schools for outdoor learning, July 2017**

	Grant funding	Donation	Sponsorship	In-kind labour / materials
<b>Type of support received</b>	16 (84%)	5 (26%)	3 (16%)	10 (53%)

n= 19

#### 4.6. Changes to school grounds

Table 11 shows the number and percentage of the 34 schools that reported making changes to their grounds for outdoor learning, demonstrating that the majority of schools have undertaken some of this kind of improvement work.

**Table 11: Changes to school grounds**

	Baseline	July 2015	July 2017
<b>Schools reporting making changes to their grounds to enable outdoor learning</b>	n/a	15 (44%)	28 (82%)

n=34

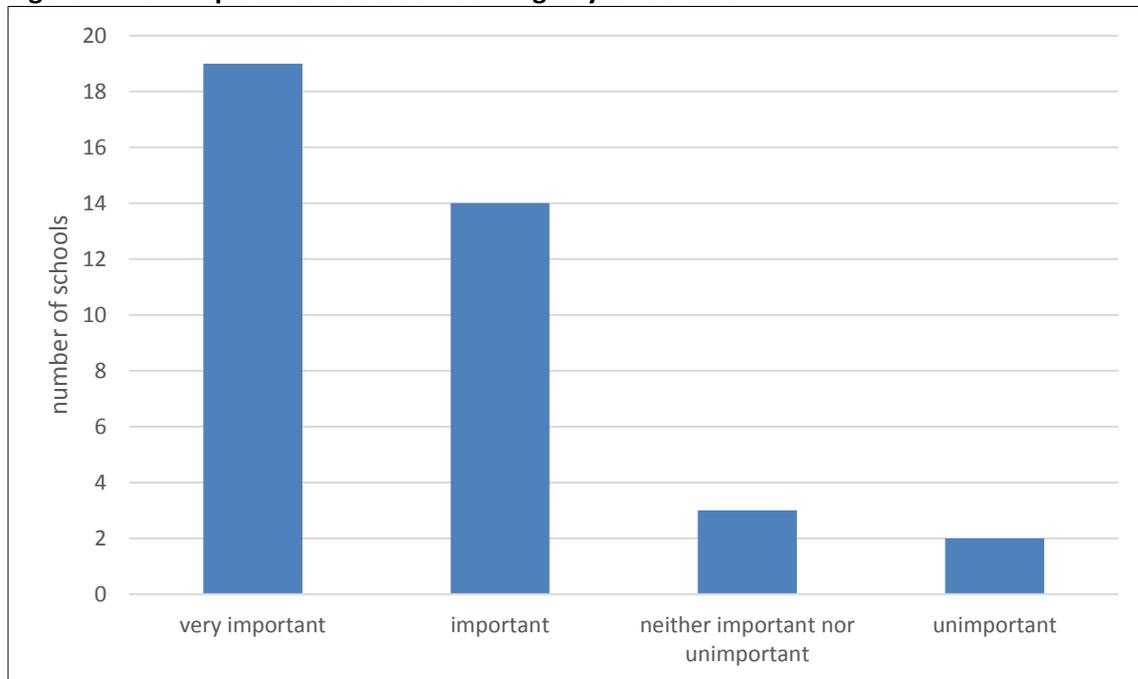
Schools were given the opportunity to provide details on the changes they had made to their grounds and, of the 38 responding schools to the 2017 survey, 30 described the changes that they had made in the academic year 2016/7. These included improvements such as re-planting and developing new areas for planting fruit, vegetables and flowers, and maintenance activities such as relocating ponds, repairing outdoor classrooms and maintaining polytunnels. Schools with farms reported continuous updating of their facilities, planting trees for coppicing and installing a second sheep pen.

#### 4.7 The importance of outdoor learning to schools

Schools were asked to state how important outdoor learning was to their school. Figure 8 shows that 33 respondents (87 per cent) agreed that outdoor learning was either 'very important' or 'important'

to their school. Three stated that outdoor learning was 'neither important nor unimportant' and two that outdoor learning was 'unimportant'. The comments on their response are outlined in Appendix 1 below.

**Figure 2: How important is outdoor learning to your school?**



n=38

## Appendix 1: Outdoor learning in schools

This section reports on the qualitative data gathered through the 2017 survey. Schools were given the opportunity to provide details on the changes they had made to their grounds, to provide comments on how important outdoor learning was in their school (Figure 2) and finally, to make general comments. All 38 responses are drawn on in order to illustrate the full range of comments and the contexts in which different schools are working.

### Comments on school grounds innovation

Out of the 38 responding schools to the 2017 survey, 30 described the changes that they had made in the previous year.

In addition to the activity described in the body of the main report, innovations reported by these schools included:

- A barefoot walking trail in the garden which is covered with willow withy structures
- Clearing an area within the adjacent woodlands for woodcraft activities
- Installation of 'junior jungle run' and an 'outdoor orchestra'
- New mud kitchen
- Building a climbing wall
- Planting bee-friendly plants
- Building an outdoor cob oven
- Adding laser-etched poetry to the walls
- Introducing rabbits and/or chickens to the school
- Restoration of ancient hedge
- New fire pit
- Removing invasive plants
- Building an outdoor woodland cabin
- Children making a welly boot holder, herb planter and community market stall.

Respondents' comments describe high levels of both maintenance and improvement of school outdoor learning facilities, and are a strong indication that outdoor learning has become an integral and sustainable part of these schools' offer. One school, however, commented that their outdoor learning facilities had 'declined', reporting that funding cuts had affected staff numbers and that curriculum and management priorities had changed within the school.

### Comments on the importance of outdoor learning

In their comments to explain their school's attitude to outdoor learning, the 33 respondents (from 29 primary schools, three special and one secondary) who agreed that outdoor learning was 'very important' or 'important' reported three particular foci, illustrated below. All comments are from primary school teachers unless indicated otherwise.

- **Children's learning.** This covered a variety of areas:

- Exploratory learning: 'Outdoor learning represents some of our core beliefs at [name] School. It allows children to explore and ask questions whilst learning about the environment around them'.
  - The environment and assessing risk: 'As part of our PPA cover we run an urban Forest School from Nursery to Year 6. As an inner city school we feel it is important to teach children about environmental issues and how to assess risk'.
  - Practical application of learning and practical skills: 'It is part of standard practice. At least 10% of all curriculum time spent outdoors (not including PE) and it is usually more than this. Learning is more relevant outside and much of what happens in the classroom is related to visits and work outside the classroom. We also run woodland skills and beach skills programmes which promote risk assessment, challenge, independence, self-belief and many other more obvious practical skills'.
  - Enterprise: 'Activities become meaningful and more enjoyable for many pupils. Being outdoors encourages social, emotional, physical and academic development. We use outdoor learning to promote enterprise - a lifelong skill'.
- **Providing 'real' and/or new experiences.** These were seen to have an effect on different areas of children's learning and development:
    - Personal and social development: 'A crucial part of the unique curriculum to provide children with real experiences that have a lasting impact on learning, personal and social development, learning skills to prepare them for life' (special school teacher).
    - Motivation and engagement: 'Engages every child or every learning, taking learning out of the classroom and makes links to real life situations'.
    - New opportunities: 'It gives children learning opportunities which they do not experience outside of school. It makes them appreciate the 'awesomeness' of the world'.
    - Real life and natural experiences: 'The outdoors is our biggest classroom offering more opportunities to access real life and natural experiences - it also supports healthier living'.
- **Supporting health and wellbeing through:**
    - A therapeutic effect: 'Forest school has therapeutic effects on children and adults'.
    - Inspiring and calming: 'We are a special school for children with SEMH. The benefits of learning outdoors are well documented and prove crucial to stimulating, inspiring, calming and soothing our children' (special school teacher).
    - The freedom to make mistakes: 'Children learn better outside and feel free to make mistakes. It is particularly good for children who do not cope in a classroom setting'.
    - Developing relationships: 'Every child experiences outdoor learning each term. It supports and enriches indoor learning and gives teachers a chance to see their class in a different light'.

One primary school respondent who agreed outdoor learning was 'important' illustrated how outdoor learning could be superseded by other priorities related to policy demands, staffing and funding:

'It is important but as a school getting out of special measures and having lost our Forest School trained TA we have had other higher priorities. We have however included learning outside across the curriculum, though not as explicitly as would like to in future when we have funds and capacity to re-focus' (primary teacher).

It was notable that three of the five respondents who stated that outdoor learning in their schools was 'neither important nor unimportant' or 'unimportant' came from secondary schools. Two secondary schools reiterated the point made by the primary school respondent above, with the one cited below outlining the difficulties of managing outdoor learning in a large school in the context of a fast-changing educational landscape:

'Too many changing and more intensive curriculum demands. Changing GCSEs and expectations of Ofsted and management mean teachers are not released from lessons to do fieldtrips. Large class sizes with no support mean that teachers are reluctant to take students outside. Curriculum does not demand fieldwork as part of the course. (It used to at A level and GCSE). This is something that bodies like yourself should campaign for' (secondary teacher).

The third secondary school argued that outdoor learning was more important for soft skills than for all curriculum subjects, and reiterated the point about some secondary teachers' reluctance to take classes outside:

Curriculum-based outdoor learning is generally seen as useful, but teachers are generally averse (outside of Biology, Physics, Geography, History) to make use of it due to perceived time constraints and habit. Outdoor learning for character, resilience, teambuilding etc is seen as important and we have 2 dedicated members of staff for that' (secondary teacher).

The fourth secondary school was far more optimistic about the role of outdoor learning within their school, agreeing that it was 'important' to the school:

'Outdoor learning is one of the things we feel we do very well. It is now part of the curriculum so that all Year 7 students do a seven-week rotation course on outdoor learning as part of their Design Technology course. This has been hugely beneficial for students and also raised the prestige and profile of outdoor learning as students see it as a subject of equal value' (secondary teacher).

These comments are further reflection of the findings from NCDP, in which hub leaders reported additional challenges to recruiting secondary schools because of time and curriculum pressures, and because of the need to engage with a much higher number of staff in these schools<sup>6</sup>. The final

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<sup>6</sup> Waite, S., Passy, R., Gilchrist, M., Hunt, A. & Blackwell, I. (2016) *Natural Connections Demonstration Project, 2012-2016: Final Report*. Natural England Commissioned Reports, Number 215, p.59.

comment shown above from a secondary school in the 2017 survey, however, shows that outdoor learning can be a valued element of secondary school curricular delivery.

### Final survey comments

Eighteen respondents took up the invitation to make any further comments if they wished (14 primary school respondents, one special and two secondary). Twelve were positive and focused on their own successes with outdoor learning. Illustrative comments are shown below; all are made by primary school respondents unless indicated otherwise.

- 'We have a thriving forest school programme with 4 qualified leaders working in our school as well as a programme of gardening'
- 'We partake in Junior Ten Tors every year. You improve navigating in national parks - Dartmoor and Bodmin'.
- 'We have two boys who struggled with learning in school. They have been attending ... an outdoor education project as an extension of what we do. They thrive outdoors. We have just applied for funding to set up Aquaponics at [school] in our new outdoor STEM centre - fingers crossed!'
- 'We have just received a quality mark Silver from Council for Learning Outside the Classroom' (special school teacher).
- 'Since joining Natural Connections our school has turned a corner in regards to its attitude towards outdoor learning. It has just found its way onto the school action plan and I have just been told that as of next year I will be released for half a day a week with the aim of embedding LINE into all areas of our school curriculum'.
- 'Although we don't have a policy yet, there is an expectation for all teachers to deliver outdoor learning in [the] curriculum for all pupils'.
- 'All sessions have been liked by our children and ... I am inviting parents to join. Many loved the sessions and gained a better understanding of the outdoors themselves'.

The remaining six focused on the challenges with outdoor learning that they were experiencing at the time they responded to the survey, and their comments indicate that schools may need to re-visit challenges over time:

- The need for **resources to support outdoor learning**: '[It is] difficult to engage teachers when [there are] so many pressures on them to fulfil levels. Would really like to know of books that have examples of teaching linked to objectives. Also research that proves the need of outdoor learning'.
- **Curricular changes**: 'The change in curriculum to a much more fact-based focus has made it harder to get teachers on board with Forest School. The child-led aspect of Forest School is much harder to implement when children have to know specific facts rather than broader skills. (We haven't let that stop us though!)'.
- Difficulties with **maintaining the school grounds**: 'It [learning outdoors] is brilliant, but always a struggle to find the funding and/or labour to look after the grounds'.
- The importance of **senior leadership support**: '[It is] very difficult to get outdoor learning sessions into English, Maths, Art, Music departments due to their perceived time constraints, even after 2x CPD sessions with dedicated OAA [outdoor and adventurous

activities] staff and departments. Needs to be a directive from SLT [senior leadership team], currently depends on individual staff and their ideas' (secondary school teacher).

- Challenges with embedding **outdoor learning in secondary schools**: 'As reported before there are many restrictions to outdoor learning in secondary schools ... Our real success has been in getting primary visits to our environmental areas' (secondary school teacher).