

Our Bright Future: Ask 1 Briefing

What is Our Bright Future?

[Our Bright Future](#) is an ambitious and innovative partnership led by The Wildlife Trusts which brings together the youth and environmental sectors. This £33 million programme funded by the National Lottery Community Fund is formed of 31 projects across the UK which are running for up to five years. Each project helps **young people aged 11-24** gain vital skills and experience and improve their wellbeing. At the same time, they act as catalysts for delivering change for their local environment and community; whilst contributing to a greener economy.



We asked young people what changes they wanted to see for themselves and the environment. Their first request is to have [more time spent learning in and about nature](#). Therefore, we call for Government to produce guidance to schools stating that **at least an hour of lesson time per day should be spent outdoors**.

The unprecedented pandemic the world is tackling has completely changed the ways in which we socialise, work and learn. With the sudden onset of Covid-19 last year, schools and learning spaces were closed for hundreds of thousands of pupils right across the UK. The resulting prolonged isolation for pupils from their support network of friends and trusted adults has had a profound impact on their physical and mental wellbeing with a marked disproportional impact shown on children from disadvantaged backgrounds and those with mental health needs².

This sudden loss of the safe and inspiring places where children could spend their time learning and playing, and the shift to new ways of schooling is exacerbating inequalities in children's health. In addition, exposing the educational disadvantage gap, with many more children at further risk of falling behind academically as well as developmentally.

It is evident that **our world cannot return to the way it was before this crisis**. But one thing we should all take with us as we begin to step forward together is a **strong connection to nature**. The myriad benefits have been clear for years but in the last year especially, nature has proved to provide us all with immeasurable comfort as well as aid. During this period, the key role nature plays in enhancing our children's resilience has been widely recognised; even more crucial considering the current unprecedented circumstances, and beyond.

Through our extensive experience, we have seen and documented the **many benefits that come from outdoor learning and contact with nature** in terms of educational attainment across the curriculum, resilience and wellbeing (see evidence below).



Outdoor learning will play a key role in helping children catch up, by increasing motivation and re-engagement with learning - particularly for those from low socio-economic backgrounds, who have been affected most during lockdown. In addition, engendering a lifelong habit of nature engagement will help children and young people to feel mentally well. And moving forward, offer something they can return to later in life when facing tough circumstances.

Teaching good environmental awareness and the sustainable stewardship of our lands and seas should be key components to preparing our youth for life. For children and young people, and indeed for all adults too, a positive connection to the natural world certainly provides a strong foundation for long, healthy and fulfilled lives, and especially for the most in need. This connection will be vital to rebalance society's relationship with the natural world, and to properly address the immediate climate and nature emergencies¹.

At the same time, we are aware of shrinking budgets, increased pressures for teaching staff, and the limited opportunities we find for young voices to engage in emerging policy, or for sustainable careers or skills development that would enable them to contribute to the sort of 'green' recovery our society now needs.

Therefore, we believe now is the **perfect time to unlock the full potential of outdoor learning in boosting children's attainment, resilience and wellbeing.** We stand ready to work with Governments across the UK and with schools, to make this happen.

Our Bright Future examples of outdoor learning solutions

Vision England project, run by Sense in partnership with the Field Studies Council, aims to develop independent living and social skills to combat isolation. The natural environment, progressive residential weekends and outdoor challenges are used to overcome barriers and build the resilience of young people who are blind and visually impaired.

MyPlace is an innovative ecotherapy project delivered by The Wildlife Trust for Lancashire, Manchester and North Merseyside in partnership with the Lancashire Care NHS Foundation Trust. The project reaches out to young people experiencing mental health issues, offering regular ecotherapy-based activities that enable young people to develop new skills and increase their self-esteem, building resilience and self-confidence while also improving environments in local communities. A total of 700 individuals have benefitted from MyPlace so far, with 95 per cent of people reporting feeling benefits in just six weeks.

¹ Despite its severity, COVID-19 is not the only emergency that humanity is currently confronting. According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), decisions we take in the next 10 years are crucial for avoiding total climate catastrophe. In addition, a majority of UK wild species are in long-term decline and similar declines in wildlife and natural ecosystems are being recorded across the globe. This also puts our species at high risk, since fully functioning natural ecosystems are necessary for all life on earth.



The Milestones project, run by Wiltshire Wildlife Trust, delivers bespoke nature-based programmes aiming to connect young people to their local, natural environment by offering opportunities to participate in practical activities that widen their knowledge, experience and appreciation of the natural environment. The project also empowers young people to gain the vital skills needed to improve their local environment, fostering a connection to and sense of responsibility for the natural world. The activities and tasks have been designed to support young people to build resilience, self-esteem and confidence, to self-reflect and notice changes within themselves and to have fun. All of which have beneficial effects on emotional and physical wellbeing, behaviour and social communication and integration. The Milestones project is currently accessible by referral and prioritises young people who are most in need and are facing challenges in their lives.

Evidence on the impact of outdoor learning on children's attainment, resilience and wellbeing.

More time spent learning in and about nature has multiple benefits for children, including improved educational attainment, resilience and overall wellbeing, as shown by several recent research projects:

1. [Christie B. and Higgins P., The Educational Outcomes of Learning for Sustainability: A Brief Review of Literature, January 2020](#)

There is increasingly strong evidence that **experiences in nature can boost academic learning, including in subject areas unrelated to the outdoor context**. Further, the benefits of time spent outdoors in terms of health and wellbeing, stress reduction, improved mental health and confidence of young people were reported; all of which are known to support academic attainment.

2. [Hudson H., Smith M., White O., Vittle K., Haswell-Walls F., Cotton I., Our Bright Future, Mid-term evaluation, June 2019](#)

The mid-term evaluation of the Our Bright Future programme has shown **that being outside engaging with nature** is a contributing factor from programme activities which **have improved young people's personal development, in particular for disadvantaged young people**. Evidence from a sample of participants indicates that participation has led to an increase in some participants' self-confidence, wellbeing and mental health, as well as improvements in attitude and motivation to learn. A small sample of second-hand evidence documenting the views of teachers suggests that at school and in college, teachers have also witnessed marked improvements in some young people's behaviour, social interactions, anxiety levels and emotional self-control as a result of participation in outdoor project activities.

3. [Natural England, Natural Connections Demonstration Project, 2012-2016: Final Report, 2016](#)

Time spent outdoors and learning about nature has been shown to reduce anxiety, depression, stress and behavioural issues. Natural England commissioned a four-year project where children from 125 schools had regular outdoor lessons. The findings from the project shows 90 per cent of pupils said learning outdoors makes them feel happier and healthier. Good mental health of teachers is also important



for the education system; the same research shows 79 per cent of teachers reported positive impacts on their teaching practice, and 72 per cent reported their own improved health and wellbeing. Additionally, 85 per cent of schools saw a positive impact on pupils' behaviour.

4. [Prisk, Cath and Dr Harry Cusworth, Muddy Hands, 2019](#)

As well as significantly improving mental health, **being outdoors considerably improves children's physical health**. Studies have shown that increasing time spent outdoors reduces children's infectious diseases (colds, sore throats etc.) by up to 80 per cent.

5. [Sheldrake R., Amos R., J. Reiss M., \(UCL Institute of Education\), Children and Nature, A Research Evaluation for The Wildlife Trusts, 2019](#)

451 children (mostly 8-9 years of age) in 12 areas across England took part by completing surveys before and after they participated in outdoor activities. Additionally, teachers, Wildlife Trust educators and 199 of the children were also observed by the UCL research team and interviewed about their experiences. Overall, the research revealed that **children's wellbeing increased after they had spent time connecting with nature**: the children showed an increase in their personal wellbeing and health over time, and they showed an increase in nature connection, pro-environmental values and demonstrated high levels of enjoyment.