Nature Friendly Schools Project
Background information

Overview

The Children and Nature programme is a flagship programme for the 25 Year Environment Plan, led jointly by Natural England, Defra and Department for Education and with a budget of £10m. The Nature Friendly Schools Project is one of three large-scale delivery projects within that Programme**. The project (£6.3m) aims to deliver natural environment interventions for around 3-400 schools with the highest proportion of disadvantaged pupils in England, and for some special schools and Alternative Provision Institutions. Participating schools and institutions will have the choice to create either greener school grounds and/or receive support for enabling a progressive programme of off-school site visits to natural environments, both being enabled and supported by a whole school programme of continuous professional development (CPD). Interventions and activities will be targeted at improving pupils’ mental health and wellbeing and their engagement with school.

Independent evaluation will help build understanding of how best to support schools to provide natural environment interventions and activities that meet school needs and deliver benefits for schools and for pupils. It will also help assess the impact of these interventions and activities on pupils’ mental health & wellbeing, their engagement with school and other programme outcomes. The evaluation will include the recruitment of control schools who will not receive the intervention.

Work with schools is expected to start during the spring term of 2019 and finish by the end of August 2022, to allow the independent project evaluation to report by March 2023.

Project aim, objectives and outcomes

**Aim:** To demonstrate and understand how an increase in supported delivery of high quality activities in natural environments, for pupils in schools with the highest proportion of disadvantaged pupils, contributes to improved mental health & wellbeing, engagement with school and other key programme outcomes.

**Objective 1:** To support target schools to establish greener school grounds or to deliver a programme of progressive regular off-site visits in natural environments or both.

**Objective 2:** To enable school staff to deliver the quality and range of activities needed to support delivery of benefits for children’s mental health & wellbeing, their engagement with learning and other programme outcomes.

**Objective 3:** To gather evidence to complete project monitoring and project reporting and to support programme evaluation
The Children and Nature programme has two priority outcomes, to achieve ‘positive benefits to pupils’:

- mental health and wellbeing
- engagement with school

Four further target outcomes are:

- school attendance
- behaviour
- physical health
- care and concern for the environment

In all cases, the intention is to evaluate whether the project’s interventions and activities in natural environments have a positive impact on these outcomes ‘back at school’.

The focus for the mental health and wellbeing outcome is in relation to improving children’s general mental health and wellbeing (such as emotional difficulties) rather than clinical conditions (such as depression).

The project responds to a wealth of evidence including on inequalities in access to the natural environment and the benefits and challenges for schools. This includes:

- In the most deprived areas of England, people tend to have the poorest health and significantly less green space than wealthier areas. On average, it was reported that 12% of children rarely or never took visits to natural environments in the previous year; furthermore, in an average month, children from lower socio-economic groups were less likely to visit natural environments regularly, either with their households or with their school, than children from A and B socio-economic groups, and were therefore less likely to experience the benefits that could be provided by natural environments. Research also indicates that young people with special educational needs and disabilities are less likely to visit the countryside or undertake rural leisure pursuits.

Evidence shows that mental health initiatives in schools can lead to significant improvements in children’s mental health, social and emotional skills, and reductions in classroom misbehaviour, anxiety, depression and bullying. Focusing on the wellbeing of students has also proven to be beneficial for a school’s academic output. Overall, “whole school approaches” are most effective in promoting wellbeing and good mental health. This reflects the findings of the Natural Connections Demonstration Project which reported that learning in natural environments had a positive impact on the broad groups of benefit areas identified by Dillon and Dickie (2011), including pupil health and wellbeing.

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** Since the 25 Year Environment Plan was published, Defra, Natural England and Department for Education have been working together to establish the basis for a programme that will encourage children to be close to nature, in and out of school. The Department for Education has made a £10m funding commitment to support implementation of the Programme between 2018 and 2023.

The Programme’s overall aim is to help children from disadvantaged backgrounds to have better access to natural environments. In support of this aim, the programme will need to deliver high quality projects that benefit disadvantaged children, and high quality evidence on the effectiveness of interventions in nature. In particular, all three organisations want to understand how children’s mental health and wellbeing can be supported through high quality activities in nature.

The programme will support three large scale delivery projects and a separate independent evaluation project:

i. Nature Friendly Schools Project

A project to demonstrate and understand how an increase in supported delivery of high quality activities in natural environments, for pupils in schools with the highest proportion of disadvantaged pupils, contributes to improved mental health & wellbeing, engagement with school and other key programme outcomes.

ii. Community Forest and Woodland Outreach Project

A project to achieve a sustainable increase in the scale of community forest and woodland outreach activities delivered to school children, particularly those in disadvantaged areas, to benefit their mental health & wellbeing, engagement with school and other programme outcomes.

iii. Growing Care Farming Project

A project to achieve a transformational change in the scale, scope and uptake of care farming services in England for children and adults facing disadvantage or social exclusion, to benefit their health and wellbeing, and their social and educational development.

iv. Evaluation Project

An independent evaluation of the Children and Nature Programme, including all three delivery Projects will be conducted to assess: a) whether the aims of the projects have been achieved b) the extent to which the projects or interventions were responsible for any impact or changes d) what works for whom, in what circumstances and why.

Natural England is the contracting authority for all three delivery projects, and Defra is the contracting authority for the evaluation project.
This is a major, national programme that will be operating at a scale not seen before. Programme design seeks to build on existing evidence and practice to identify high quality, evidence-driven delivery models that can be replicated beyond the programme, and to generate understanding about what works, for whom and why. The intended result of this programme is to deliver a sustained improvement in the scale and scope of natural environment interventions and activities provided for children.