National Trust

Reconnecting children with nature

Findings of the Natural Childhood Inquiry

Contents

1. Executive Summary

This report summarises the evidence received and findings of the National Trust's Natural Childhood Inquiry. The inquiry – which drew responses from a wide range of people, including experts and academics, organisations spanning a range of sectors, schools and members of the public – asked respondents to identify:

(i) the most important barriers to children spending more time outdoors

(ii) actions that individuals and families – including grandparents and godparents, as well as the parents themselves – could do to help their children engage with nature

(iii) ways in which community groups and local and national organisations could support families in getting outdoors and closer to nature

(iv) policy changes needed to ensure that every child has the opportunity to develop a personal connection with the natural world

Analysis of responses indicated that the barriers preventing children from experiencing and enjoying a connection with nature and the outdoors span six main areas:

Barrier 1 Unreasonable health and safety culture	**Barrier 2** Traffic dangers	**Barrier 3** The rise of indoor entertainment
Barrier 4 Finding time and space for nature in schools and learning	**Barrier 5** Receding access to quality green and natural spaces	**Barrier 6** Socio-economic and cultural factors

Respondents felt that the role of families in addressing some of these challenges was especially important. More opportunities for individuals and families to support their children's access to nature could be realised through recognising that:

- Simple and free experiences of the outdoors and nature can easily slot into the routine of most families.
- Networks of family and friends are often an underused resource that could enable more opportunities for children to connect with nature.
- Parents can draw on the support of local community groups and national organisations.

At the community and organisation level, respondents noted that:

- Partnership working between NGOs, community groups and schools is critical.
- Schools can do a lot for themselves to help children get closer to nature.
- Information on opportunities for families and children to access nature is disjointed.
- Nature organisations must be more proactive in promoting and taking nature to where people live.

At the policy level it appeared that there were five main recurring themes:

- There is a need to continue to improve access to quality green spaces.
- Children's education can benefit from giving more space for nature in the National Curriculum.
- Clearer health and safety guidance alongside an emphatic shift to a benefit/risk health and safety culture is needed.
- Streets can be made safer for outdoor play.
- Grassroots community initiatives need continued support.

Overall, four different dimensions of children's lives were identified by the inquiry as significantly shaping the opportunities and quality of experiences in accessing nature. In each area the responses indicated there was an overarching key task:

Dimension	**Task**
1. Education and learning	Grow the role of nature as part of the everyday school experience
2. Nature spaces	Grow, promote and better connect the network of accessible child- and family-friendly nature play spaces in every community
3. Risk and fear	Rapidly adopt a benefit/risk approach across all sectors and support the need for adventure in children's lives
4. Family life	Promote nature and outdoor play as a fun part of a healthy, happy and enjoyable family life

In view of the wide span of areas covered, it was clear from responses that no single organisation would be able to make the difference alone, and that consequently a multi-dimensional and multi-partner approach is likely to be more effective.

It was also clear that creating an enduring shift in the opportunities for children to connect with nature is likely to require actions at many different levels including: practical actions for individuals and families; collaboration between different charities and community organisations; inspiration and support of more local grassroots community action; making better connections to benefit from the skills, resources and reach available to government and corporate partners; and backed by careful but quick shifts in policy.

It is hoped that the results of this inquiry will initiate the first steps of a larger, collaborative, cross-sectoral response, which those responding to our inquiry indicated was needed to ensure that all children are given the opportunity to develop a personal connection with nature.

2. The Natural Childhood Inquiry

This report synthesises the results of the National Trust's Natural Childhood Inquiry which ran from 30 March to 25 May 2012. The report seeks to highlight the main areas of consensus on:

- the barriers preventing today's children getting outdoors and closer to nature; and
- the solutions with the greatest potential to address this.

The inquiry received many responses from the general public as well as experts in the fields of education, health, nature conservation and play and beyond. The National Trust would like to thank all those who took the time to contribute to this inquiry.

Based on the responses, we make recommendations for areas for collaborative action, identifying those which appear to have the greatest potential to improve the connection between children and the natural world.

The journey so far

In 2010, the National Trust opened a national debate, *Outdoor Nation*, which saw roaming reporter Leni Hatcher travelling around the UK asking people whether they felt we are losing touch with the outdoors and, if so, whether it mattered. The resounding answer to both questions, throughout Leni's journey, was 'yes'.

As a result, the National Trust began further work in two areas:

(i) Work with the BRITDOC Foundation to find partners and film-makers to produce a feature-length documentary (*Project Wild Thing*) exploring children's contemporary relationship with nature.

(ii) Commissioning Stephen Moss, naturalist, broadcaster and writer, to write the Natural Childhood report, gathering together all the current thinking on children's disconnection from nature.

The Natural Childhood report was published on 30 March 2012. It was sent to leading experts, organisations and policy-makers to ask their views on how we might reconnect children with nature. A wider debate was also initiated through several newspapers, blog websites and social media platforms inviting members of the public to share their views.

The responses from the inquiry have been brought together in this report and the recommendations will be reviewed at a summit event on 25 September 2012 in London. This event brings together experts and interested parties to:

– build consensus around the actions needed to give every child the opportunity to form a personal connection with the natural world; and

– identify potential partners who are interested in joining together in a collaborative campaign for change.

Inquiry Methodology

Open call for views

The Natural Childhood Inquiry sought the views of a broad constituency of people – from parents, teachers, academics, practitioners in the field, as well as those simply interested in the topic. To broaden the net of respondents, the National Trust asked them to cascade the call for comment through their own networks, and a wide range of coverage through social media and newspapers, magazines and broadcasters carried an invitation to express views.

The inquiry asked respondents four questions:

– *What do you think are the most important barriers to children spending more time outdoors?*

– *What can individuals and families – including grandparents and godparents, as well as the parents themselves – do to help their children engage with nature?*

– *How can community groups and local and national organisations support families in getting outdoors and closer to nature?*

– *What policy changes are needed to ensure that every child has the opportunity to develop a personal connection with the natural world?*

The National Trust received responses as follows:

– 132 direct responses

– 63 Facebook comments

– 18 staff suggestions

– Outdoor Nation Blog responses

– Responses/comments carried in various newspapers

We also received some wider input via an online *Guardian* webchat with Dame Fiona Reynolds, Director-General of the National Trust, and Stephen Moss, the author of the Natural Childhood report.

Expert Delphi Analysis

For analysis by expert bodies and individuals, we also undertook a small-scale 'Delphi'-style study. This involved conducting a series of structured telephone interviews with the following :

– Intelligent Health

– King's College London

– Play England

– The New Economics Foundation

– The University of Exeter

– The University of Essex

– The John Muir Trust

– Waste Watch

– A leading expert on attitudes to risk

– A Professor of Marketing from a university business school

– A children's outdoor education writer and presenter

– A wildlife writer and broadcaster

The purpose of this exercise was to get views on the emerging issues being raised by respondents, building a more detailed picture from specific sectors, and adding depth to the broader call for responses.

3. Barriers to a natural childhood

In the Natural Childhood report, Stephen Moss outlined a number of barriers that might be obstructing children's relationship with the outdoors and nature. These barriers were drawn from published evidence, including academic research papers, science journal articles, government research as well as commentary in the media. We asked respondents to the inquiry to consider:

What do you think are the most important barriers to children spending more time outdoors?

Respondent views on the Natural Childhood analysis

We received a wide range of different opinions on which barriers posed the most significant challenges to children's connection with nature. When looking at the barriers identified by Stephen Moss in the Natural Childhood report we found the following:

Barrier identified in Natural Childhood report	**Level of agreement from inquiry respondents**
The danger from traffic, and how this severely limits children's ability to venture outside their homes.	High level of agreement amongst respondents.
The issue of health and safety, and how an obsession with trying to achieve a 'zero risk' world is severely limiting children's freedom.	High level of agreement amongst respondents.
Parental fears of 'stranger danger' and its consequences for children's freedom to roam in the wider environment.	Received relatively little mention in the responses and less than previous research might have led us to expect.[1] This may be because these respondents are aware that concerns over stranger danger are often inflated.
'Arms-closed' conservation. The past and sometimes present role of nature conservation organisations.	Was considered to be a very significant barrier by a large number – but not the majority – of respondents.

continued...

[1] Living Streets and Parentline Plus, (2010) Walk to School report: Is it safe to let our children walk to school?

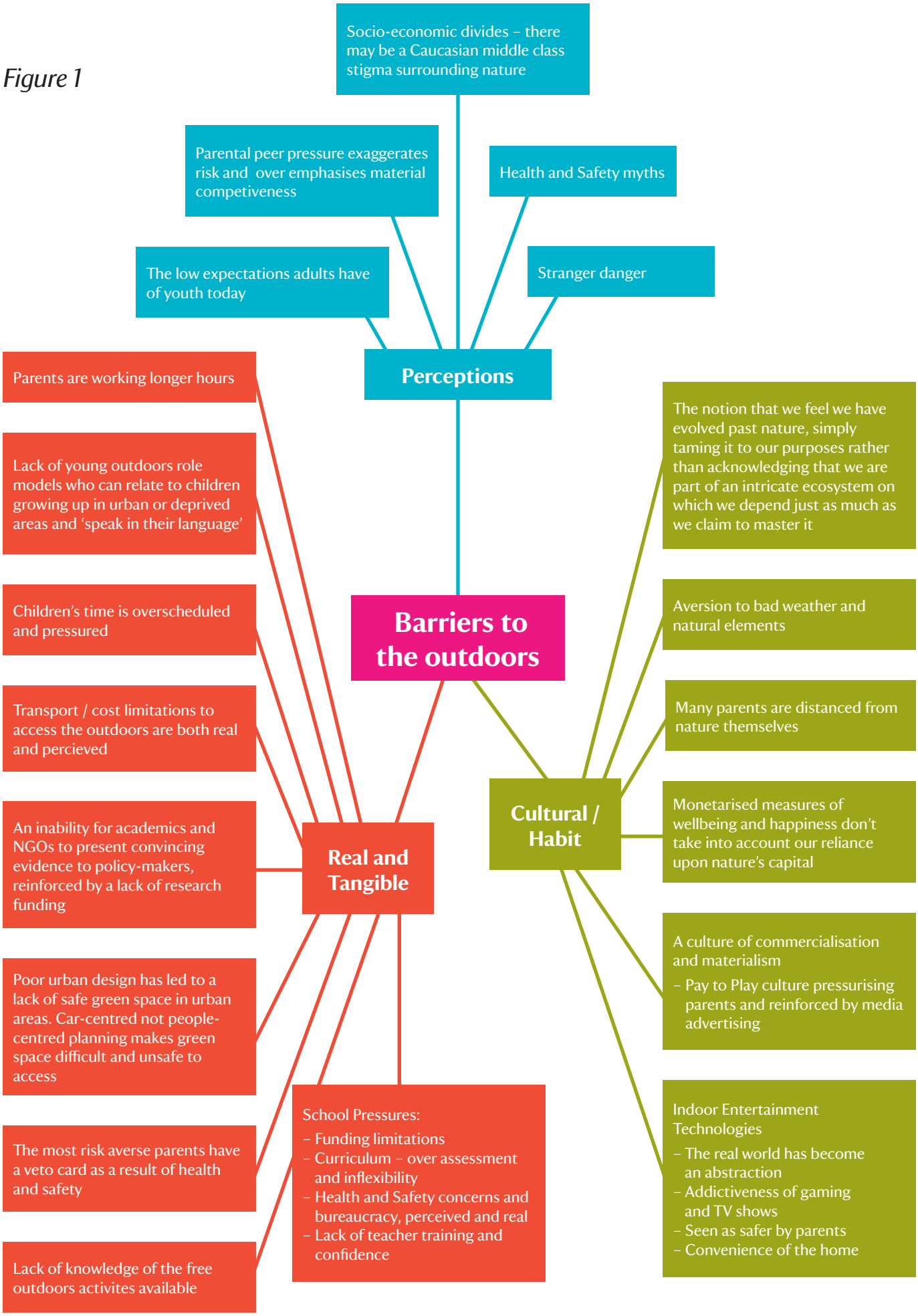
Barrier identified in Natural Childhood report	Level of agreement from inquiry respondents
The negative attitudes of some authority figures, who regard children's natural play as something to be stopped rather than encouraged.	Received moderate levels of acknowledgement and agreement, especially with regard to local council authorities and the police. However, many spoke strongly on behalf of teachers who have been trying for years to encourage further use of outdoor learning in the curriculum.

In addition to those barriers identified in the Natural Childhood report, many new barriers to the outdoors were put forward for consideration, including:

- The rise of indoor entertainment technologies.
- Accessibility limitations to green space (poor town planning, transport, cost).
- Socio-economic factors.
- Constraints in schools and education (funding, curriculum, health and safety, and training).
- Parental disengagement with nature and the outdoors.
- Very low public awareness of the problem or activities available.
- Monetised measures of well-being.
- Lack of young, charismatic outdoors and nature role models.
- Cultural aversion to poor weather and the elements.
- Low expectations and mistrust of youngsters.

Figure 1 attempts to capture the breadth of issues raised by respondents.

Figure 1


Barriers to the outdoors
Perceptions
Socio-economic divides – there may be a Caucasian middle class stigma surrounding nature
Parental peer pressure exaggerates risk and over emphasises material competiveness
Health and Safety myths
The low expectations adults have of youth today
Stranger danger
Real and Tangible
Parents are working longer hours
Lack of young outdoors role models who can relate to children growing up in urban or deprived areas and 'speak in their language'
Children's time is overscheduled and pressured
Transport / cost limitations to access the outdoors are both real and percieved
An inability for academics and NGOs to present convincing evidence to policy-makers, reinforced by a lack of research funding
Poor urban design has led to a lack of safe green space in urban areas. Car-centred not people-centred planning makes green space difficult and unsafe to access
The most risk averse parents have a veto card as a result of health and safety
Lack of knowledge of the free outdoors activites available
School Pressures:
– Funding limitations
– Curriculum – over assessment and inflexibility
– Health and Safety concerns and bureaucracy, perceived and real
– Lack of teacher training and confidence
Cultural / Habit
The notion that we feel we have evolved past nature, simply taming it to our purposes rather than acknowledging that we are part of an intricate ecosystem on which we depend just as much as we claim to master it
Aversion to bad weather and natural elements
Many parents are distanced from nature themselves
Monetarised measures of wellbeing and happiness don't take into account our reliance upon nature's capital
A culture of commercialisation and materialism
– Pay to Play culture pressurising parents and reinforced by media advertising
Indoor Entertainment Technologies
– The real world has become an abstraction
– Addictiveness of gaming and TV shows
– Seen as safer by parents
– Convenience of the home

Recurring themes

Looking across the responses, six main barriers emerged as recurrent themes:

Barrier 1: Unreasonable health and safety culture

There was resounding consensus that risk-averse attitudes to health and safety are significantly inhibiting children's access to natural spaces. There was a sense that authority attitudes and regulations aimed at keeping children safe from harm have been taken to an unreasonable extreme.

For example, one email respondent told us that we need to:

'Bring some common sense back to "risk assessment". Health & Safety was originally related to the Factories Act, not about stopping children from playing conkers in the playground!'

However, many professionals also suggested that in an attempt to reduce bureaucracy, health and safety guidance was now oversimplified and insufficient. A representative from the National Union of Teachers (NUT) told us that:

'It is felt that there is a distinct lack of guidance from the Health and Safety Executive who do not appreciate the circumstances in which teachers work, and guidance…often tends to encourage the production of unnecessarily complex risk assessments.'

The National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT) similarly wrote in an article in the Mail Online that health and safety guidance has been cut back too far.

Respondents suggested that unclear guidance for teachers and outdoor practitioners reinforces a larger sense of uncertainty which percolates throughout society, leading authorities and parents to err on the side of caution.

The way in which the media covered these issues was flagged as a difficult issue, swinging between ridiculing overt health and safety culture at the same time as running a large number of stories around health and safety shortcomings or failures. The general consensus was that the balance was wrong and that the inherent fear of being publicly criticised in the press or TV news inhibited many schools, community groups and parents.

The intensity of media coverage was also seen to play a large role in perpetuating health and safety fears and has apparently led to a preoccupation with parental peer pressure and 'what others might think', which if not necessarily preventing families taking trips outdoors with children, was judged to be restricting the scope of children's experiences of the outdoors and nature.

A number of respondents noted that the overall consequence that the most cautious individuals are essentially being given a 'veto card' on outdoor activities which involve an element of risk, and that this obstructs many activities and trips from taking place.

Barrier 2: Traffic dangers

A recurrent fear put forward by respondents is that the nation's roads have become too busy and dangerous for children to be allowed to roam very far from home. There is a widespread feeling among respondents that there are too many cars on the road and that these cars go too fast to allow children to play unsupervised in the streets and green spaces near where they live. One respondent to the Guardian online blog told us that:

'With massively increased road traffic, and more aggressive road conditions, I doubt most parents would be happy to let their kids negotiate road crossings to access nature on their own.'

It was also pointed out that many of these cars are often on the school run:

'Paradoxically a lot of that traffic is composed of parents taking kids to school as they can't walk to school because the roads are too dangerous.'

This view is given credence by evidence presented suggesting that at peak times 1 in 5 cars on the road are taking children to and from school.[2]

It was also felt that cars are too often given priority over pedestrians in residential areas, making routes to school or local green space too dangerous for children to walk by themselves or with friends. This was felt not just a problem for urban areas though; some respondents noted that in rural areas cars often speed on open country roads, more and more heavy goods vehicles are taking these rural routes and these roads are so narrow that many have no pavements along them to accommodate pedestrians.

Barrier 3: The rise of indoor entertainment

Many respondents said they thought the growth of indoor entertainment has reduced the amount of time children spend outdoors experiencing nature. One respondent succinctly cited this as the:

'Addictive and distractive nature of TV, internet and games consoles – the easy option over going outdoors.'

Another, from a youth engagement organisation, framed the challenge as follows:

'The digital lifestyle! Getting young people to see beyond, and unplug, their smart phone, the internet and the television and breathe in fresh air instead.'

[2] Living Streets, (2008), Backseat children, how our car dependent culture compromises safety on our streets.

Numerous respondents likewise told us that the abundance of indoor entertainment technologies available today has led children into a more sedentary, sheltered childhood. It was thought that many parents may be reinforcing this trend as the home is perceived as a safer, more convenient, location for entertainment, where children can be easily supervised and protected from potential physical dangers.

Half of our expert interviewees explicitly mentioned commercialisation and indoor technologies as a significant barrier to the outdoors. One children's education expert told us that this is perpetuated by the huge and growing technology industries, which have big advertising budgets, and tend to target children and adults, encouraging them to purchase ever more in-home entertainment technologies.

Other interviewees told us that this has led to a culture where fun and entertainment were increasingly perceived as services to be bought, not created through one's imagination. For instance, one email respondent told us that:

'A dependence upon TV & IT has diluted children's ability to create their own entertainment.'

The rise of such a 'pay to play' culture was a frequently cited example of how entertainment and enjoyment has become 'product-ised', squeezing out the perceived value to be found in free entertainment such as outdoor play and learning.

However, the arguments presented by respondents around technology were not universally negative. Some mentioned an opportunity for technology to play a role in initiating an interest in the outdoors, serving as a 'bridge' through which children and their families might make an initial connection. Examples of this cited included Play England's online 'Play Map,' iSpot and the Woodland Trust's Nature Detectives website.

Others though still questioned whether such entertainment technologies were able to create anything beyond a superficial connection, arguing that nature needs to be experienced first hand if children are to build a deeper understanding and care for nature, or able to reap the wider benefits.

A further point raised was that entertainment technologies were resulting in adults becoming increasingly separated from the leisure activities engaged in by their children. At the same time, technology was suggested as also removing the outdoors in their own leisure activities. Respondents strongly felt that this meant that a growing number of parents were less likely lead by example in participating in outdoors activities with children, or as role models for enjoying the outdoors.

Barrier 4: Finding time and space for nature in schools and learning

A large number of respondents felt strongly that the school environment was the ideal place for children to foster a love of nature. However, it was clear from respondents that schools faced many challenges in attempting to put this into practice. The main pressures upon schools cited by respondents were:

- Lack of funds to take day and residential trips to outdoor learning sites.
- Time pressures of accommodating this alongside an already full curriculum.
- A lack of teacher training specifically for outdoors learning, leading to low self-confidence when taking trips and conducting lessons outdoors.
- Concerns about health and safety bureaucracy and unclear guidance on taking trips and lessons outdoors.

For example, one email respondent told us that:

'In recent years, for many schools and pupils, school trips and other activities outside the classroom have become prohibitively expensive.'

As well as saying:

'A worry about lack of training and whether teachers are "allowed" to do certain activities or go to particular areas.'

Some respondents also noted that whilst outdoor play spaces were important, some schools were limited spatially. Those with small grounds were noted as being especially constrained with little physical capacity for developing nature spaces on site. One email respondent emphasised the importance of good space provision:

'Schools must have regular access to nature-based, outdoor play areas, with much of their learning being self-led with adults there to provide additional learning structure.'

Together with health and safety concerns, respondents noted a problem of too many man-made playgrounds being built, with little or no green or natural space. It was also mentioned that playtimes are slowly being reduced due to curriculum pressures, which also contributes to the erosion of children's contact time with the outdoors and nature.

Barrier 5: Receding access to quality green and natural spaces

A large proportion of respondents told us that there are too few safe, easily accessible, green and natural spaces in and around many residential areas. The main criticisms highlighted the decreasing quantity and quality of natural play areas close by for children and adults. For example, one participant in the Guardian online web chat told us that today:

'Houses are squashed together with small patches of grass so small that planting trees can cause problems. The green areas you find are soulless squares of grass with a few shrubs or small trees.'

This frankly summarised many who noted that urbanisation was leading to a significant reduction in safe natural spaces for children to play and roam in.

A strong recurring theme for many was that the best nature reserves and outdoor play areas are often too far away for many people to benefit, most especially for those without a car or funds for transport to get there. This barrier was noted to be especially severe for children from poorer families who were the most likely to find it more difficult to reach good quality green and natural spaces, or were most likely to have less of this on their doorstep (see Barrier 6 below). A representative from a national charity therefore identified the 'lack of appropriate play spaces in reasonable distance', as both a simple but significant barrier to the outdoors.

At the same time, some respondents spoke up for the need not to overlook the urban environment as including areas potentially full of nature, for free – or at least cautioned against assuming that nature and the outdoors should be seen as synonymous with only the wildest and remote landscapes far away from urban populations.

Barrier 6: Socio-economic and cultural factors

The inquiry found a strong consensus that socio-economic and cultural factors significantly exacerbate the barriers against connecting with nature for some parts of society. In terms of access to 'wild places', some very clear social differences were mentioned. A study of participants in the John Muir Award conducted by the Glasgow Centre for Population Health was cited. This showed that those living in the poorest circumstances were over six times more likely than the rest of the Award participants to have had no previous experience of wild places. It was noted that 23% of Award participants from the poorest circumstances had no previous experience of wild places, compared with about 4% of the rest of the Award participants.

Others pointed to the large number of research reports that have taken up the issue of societal inequalities and tried to investigate their impact on children's connection with nature. For instance, Natural England's 2011 *Access and Engagement Report* was highlighted, which notes inequalities in green space provision among poorer areas. Scotland's National Parks 2009 report was also cited which found that poverty, poor health and lack of opportunity were barriers to the outdoors.

Ethnicity was also raised as a factor, with many telling us that minority ethnic groups felt increasingly isolated from nature and experienced this sense of isolation more than other cultural groups.

On the other hand, a number of respondents told us that a comparatively rural upbringing did not mean that children would automatically desire or be able to connect with nature. For example, it was noted that in many rural areas children are prevented from engaging with nature by the lack of pavements along narrow lanes, poor road crossings and the fast, heavy goods vehicles that frequent rural roads. One response from a primary school head-teacher noted:

'Although we are a rural primary school we are aware that many of our children have little or no understanding of nature – even the children who live on farms.'

Another respondent raised a broader point around the cultural context in which children are being raised. They noted that for too many children:

'…it is not considered cool to go outdoors, there is an expectation to consume designer goods, an expectation on quick fix virtual encounters celebrity society: being 'famous' is more important than actually being capable.'

The time and cost of accessing quality outdoor space was also noted as a persistent obstacle for many parents to overcome, including those with average family household budgets.

Overall, the balance of responses indicated that:

- wider changes in the dynamics of childhood meant that the issue of a declining connection with nature and the natural world was probably being felt across many different parts of society; but that
- socio-economic and cultural factors are creating a much broader – and very much more fundamental – set of barriers for certain children and families.

4. The role of individuals and families in connecting children with nature

In the Natural Childhood inquiry, we asked people to consider the question:

What can indiviuals and families – including grandparents and godparents, as well as the parents themselves – do to help their children engage with nature?

Response to the Natural Childhood report

Some respondents thought that we had not placed enough emphasis on the role of parents in the Natural Childhood report. We received much feedback that parents and families were, of all potential actors, the most important people to engage if we are to succeed in connecting children with the natural world. Respondents agreed that although individual and family behaviours can be the hardest of all to influence, they can be the best window of opportunity for truly engaging the child.

Some respondents noted the need to also tailor efforts in deliberate ways to engage harder to reach families who have a very distant connection with nature and the outdoors. In particular it was suggested that it was essential that the most vulnerable individuals and families receive consistent external support and encouragement from other organisations to assist them in making long-lasting changes to their lifestyles.

Throughout the inquiry, there was also a strong sense that a love of nature can be 'inherited' and passed down from grandparents and parents to child. In order to facilitate this, respondents repeatedly emphasised that a division should not be made between the role of parents and the outdoor activities of children. For this reason, many respondents highlighted that, alongside allowing children the freedom for unstructured play, parents and grandparents themselves also needed to engage visibly with nature and take part in the same activities if they were to pass on a love of the outdoors to their children.

The fuller range of suggestions that our respondents recommended for individuals and families is illustrated in *Figure 2*.

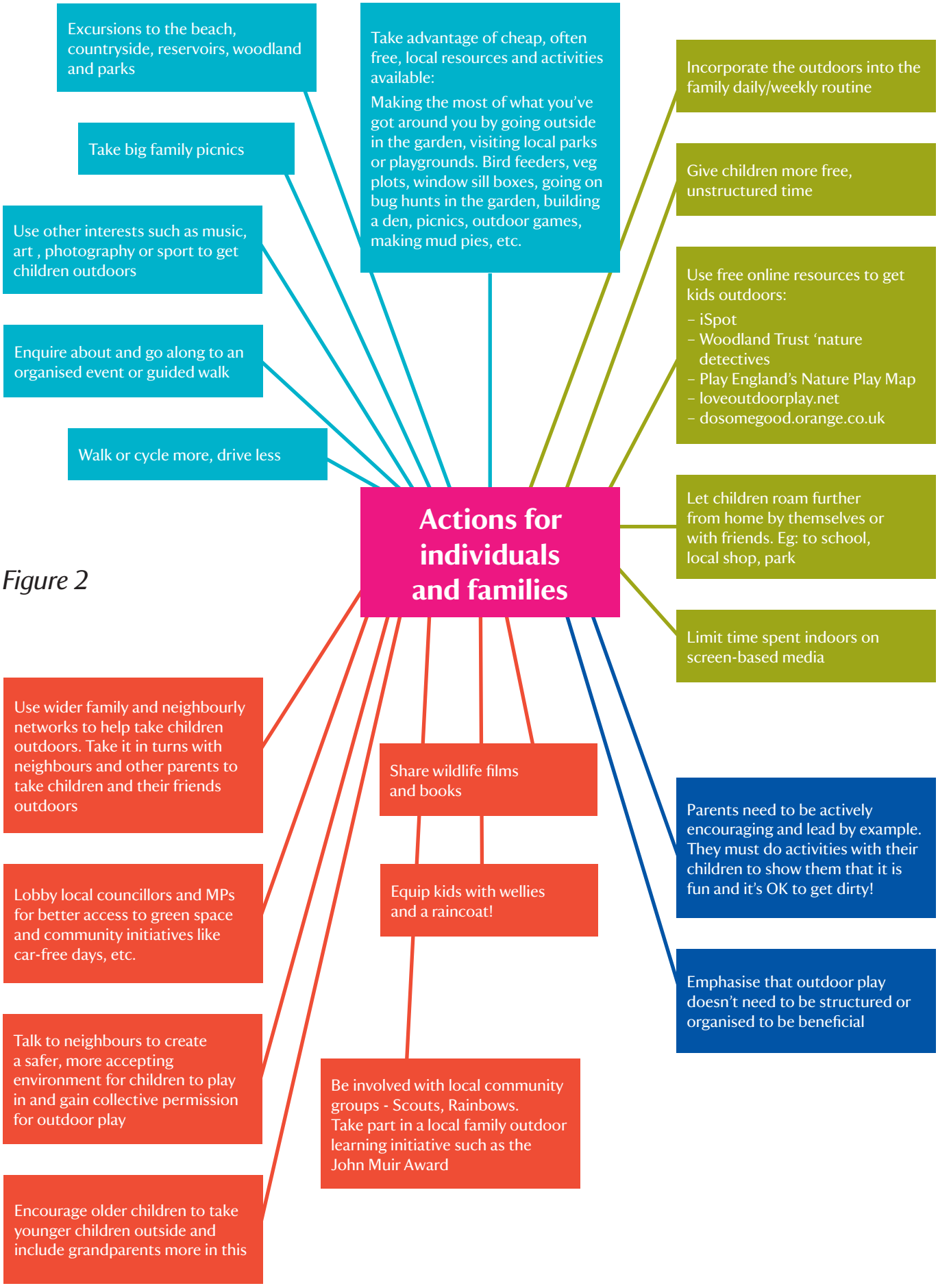

Actions for individuals and families
Excursions to the beach, countryside, reservoirs, woodland and parks
Take big family picnics
Use other interests such as music, art , photography or sport to get children outdoors
Enquire about and go along to an organised event or guided walk
Walk or cycle more, drive less
Take advantage of cheap, often free, local resources and activities available:
Making the most of what you've got around you by going outside in the garden, visiting local parks or playgrounds. Bird feeders, veg plots, window sill boxes, going on bug hunts in the garden, building a den, picnics, outdoor games, making mud pies, etc.
Incorporate the outdoors into the family daily/weekly routine
Give children more free, unstructured time
Use free online resources to get kids outdoors:
– iSpot
– Woodland Trust 'nature detectives
– Play England's Nature Play Map
– loveoutdoorplay.net
– dosomegood.orange.co.uk
Let children roam further from home by themselves or with friends. Eg: to school, local shop, park
Limit time spent indoors on screen-based media
Use wider family and neighbourly networks to help take children outdoors. Take it in turns with neighbours and other parents to take children and their friends outdoors
Lobby local councillors and MPs for better access to green space and community initiatives like car-free days, etc.
Talk to neighbours to create a safer, more accepting environment for children to play in and gain collective permission for outdoor play
Encourage older children to take younger children outside and include grandparents more in this
Share wildlife films and books
Equip kids with wellies and a raincoat!
Be involved with local community groups - Scouts, Rainbows.
Take part in a local family outdoor learning initiative such as the John Muir Award
Parents need to be actively encouraging and lead by example. They must do activities with their children to show them that it is fun and it's OK to get dirty!
Emphasise that outdoor play doesn't need to be structured or organised to be beneficial

Figure 2

Recurring themes

From the responses there appeared to be three main areas for solutions for individuals and families:

1: Simple and free experiences of the outdoors and nature can easily slot into most family routines

Respondents indicated that there was a tendency for nature to be portrayed in the media as exotic, challenging and wild, with extreme experiences, rare animals and wilderness locations. This served to disengage people from the different kinds of experiences of the outdoors and nature on their doorstep, and make it separate from day-to-day life. As a consequence it may be perceived as something 'hard to do'.

This was noted by respondents who identified an apparently common perception that 'nature' can only be experienced out in the countryside, far away from urban civilisation. This distinction between 'wilderness' and 'civilisation', it was argued, obscured the fact that nature is in fact everywhere. One respondent in a web chat with Fiona Reynolds and Stephen Moss highlighted that:

'People (especially children these days) need to understand that civilisation and nature, urban and rural are intimately and inextricably interconnected.'

A similar 'compartmentalising' view that respondents suggested we need to address is that nature can be experienced only in structured, supervised sessions led by officially trained personnel. Many respondents agreed that:

'Just being outside can be inspiring enough! Parents shouldn't worry about having structured activities as unstructured play can be just as engaging and can provide ample opportunities for investigation and learning.'

A great many respondents linked this in with giving children more free time to play outdoors, illustrated by one respondent who noted that:

'So much is squeezed into a rushed and demanding day that they [children] are left with little or no time for simple, unstructured play.'

Another email respondent urged parents to rediscover the joy of playing outdoors and with their families saying:

'Be a kid yourself – show them how to jump in the mud!'

Another parent suggested they found it easier than they thought they would:

'The solution I found was to find a beautiful piece of woodland that was close to home and not in any way hard to get to. Then I blocked out one day a week (every Thursday) on the calendar that we would go to the woods... every week rain or shine. It was that simple...find a place close and go regularly.'

Respondents therefore emphatically recommended that individuals and families could connect more with nature by simply using the cheap and often free, local resources on their doorsteps. They could benefit from treating access to nature as being more about the simple pleasures that could be added to everyday life. Popular activities such as den building, bug hunting, picnics in the garden and watching ducks on the canal or pond – among many others – were frequently suggested by different respondents. One interviewee was quick to point to the benefit for parents in that they will never experience anything to match the enjoyment of seeing their child's delight when playing outdoors.

According to respondents, once children have been allowed to enjoy these simpler aspects of outdoors and nature from an early age – and closer to home – they will become confident enough to do these things unsupervised. This intervention frequently went hand in hand with limiting the time spent on indoor entertainment technologies, which was also a well-recommended intervention for individuals and families.

2: Networks of family and friends are often an underused resource

Many respondents noted that parents should not feel alone in supporting their child's access to nature and the outdoors. For instance, one email respondent urged individuals to:

'Use the wider family unit to share out the responsibility of outdoors routine.'

Another suggested a practical way of doing this could be for family members and friends to alternate taking children on excursions or trips to local green areas.

Specifically, many respondents often noted the important role of grandparents for sharing ideas and knowledge about the outdoors. Numerous respondents thought that grandparents could share stories with children about how they used to play outdoors when they were young. One grandparent responding by email took joy in their experience:

'My eight year old granddaughter has a largish weeping Willow tree in the family garden. At the end of April, I showed her how to make a "house"' out of it. We plaited some of the branches (loosely) and picked flowers to decorate the "walls" and tidied up the inside by pruning off the dead twigs etc. Garden chairs provided the seating inside! Visitors have been treated to a visit to the willow house!'

Another solution also advocated that individuals and families can make their community safer as places for children to play by speaking to neighbours in the surrounding area. For instance, one play practitioner suggested that this could reassure parents that the area is safe to play in while also gaining 'collective permission' for children to play in the streets. Respondents suggested that if neighbourly bonds are stronger, the chances are far higher that neighbours will be willing to keep an eye on children playing nearby.

3: Parents can draw on the support of local community groups and national organisations

In addition to personal and informal networks of support, many respondents noted that there are many organisations on hand in local communities which dedicate time and effort towards taking children outside regularly and can inspire children to engage more with nature. For instance, an array of local charities and outdoor nature groups run regular outdoor activity sessions for children, as well as the local branches of national organisations like the Cubs, Scouts, Brownies, Girl Guides, Duke of Edinburgh Award and the John Muir Trust. There were significant levels of agreement that individuals and families would benefit greatly by exploring these avenues. For example, one email advocate of this told us that:

'They can get involved as groups or families or individuals with organisations that are local or national that can have the projects and resources already to educate and inspire children to get in touch with nature.'

This avenue of support for individuals and families could also be appealing as these groups aim to 'provide a safe and supportive experience for the entire family', and are able to offer personal, practical support and advice to families.

5. The role of community groups, local and national organisations in connecting children with nature

In the Natural Childhood inquiry, we asked people to consider the question:

How can community groups and local and national organisations support families in getting outdoors and closer to nature?

As organisations with a direct interest in engaging children with the outdoors and nature, these groups are well placed to enable children and parents joining up solutions at a broader scale. Included within this category are:

– Schools

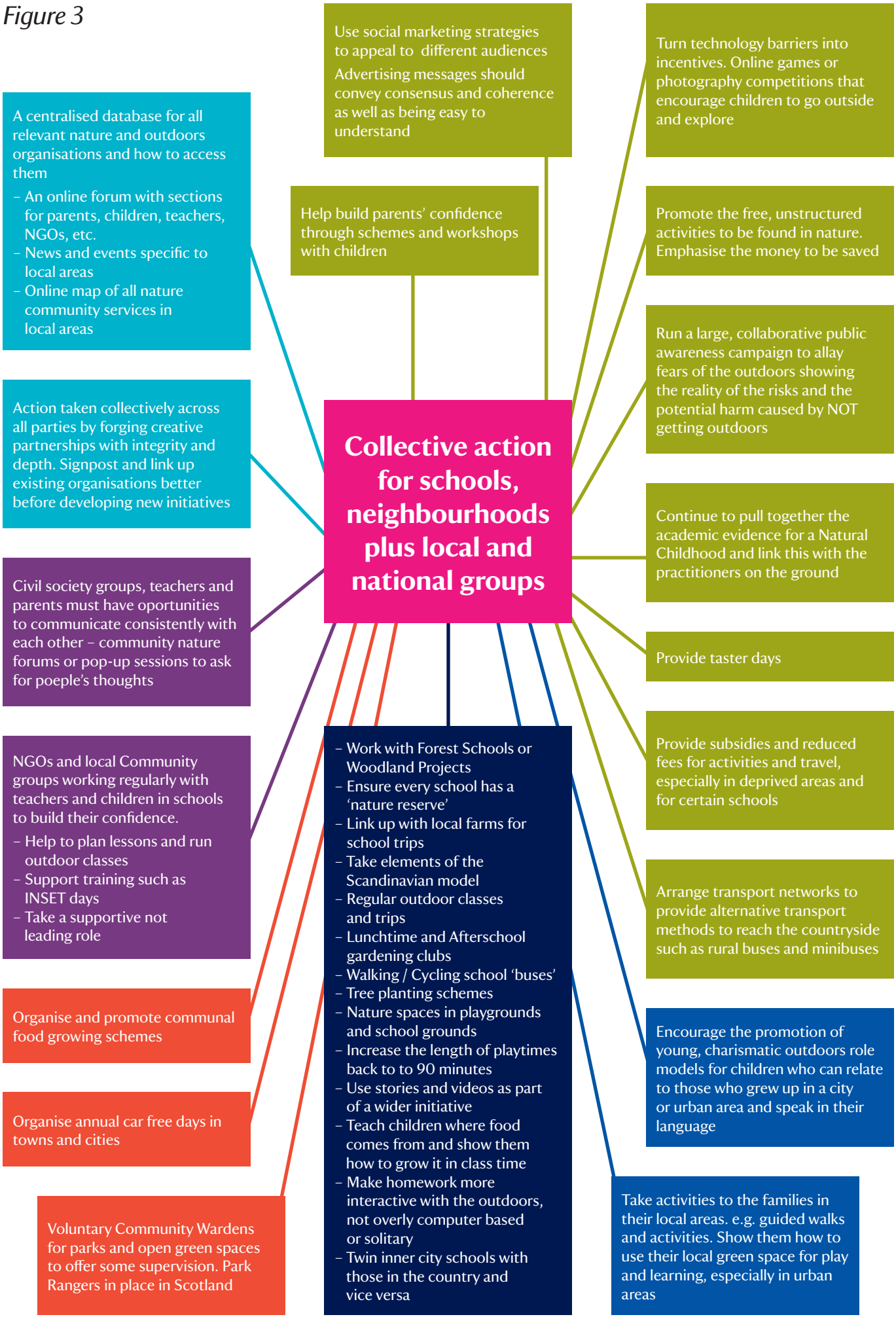
– Local community groups and charities

– National NGOs

When asked, many interviewees told us that it should be these groups of people who lead the way forward to reconnect children with nature. By rallying around individuals from their communities and joining forces with other organisations, these groups have the ability to promote change on a wider scale. A key point respondents raised though was that the best solutions were likely to be joint-working across these sectors rather than perhaps within their own established networks alone. Our respondents were therefore clear that schools and civil society groups must work together more frequently and effectively.

Figure 3, overleaf, summarises the range of issues raised in relation to this question.

Figure 3


Collective action for schools, neighbourhoods plus local and national groups
Use social marketing strategies to appeal to different audiences
Advertising messages should convey consensus and coherence as well as being easy to understand
Turn technology barriers into incentives. Online games or photography competitions that encourage children to go outside and explore
A centralised database for all relevant nature and outdoors organisations and how to access them
– An online forum with sections for parents, children, teachers, NGOs, etc.
– News and events specific to local areas
– Online map of all nature community services in local areas
Help build parents' confidence through schemes and workshops with children
Promote the free, unstructured activities to be found in nature. Emphasise the money to be saved
Run a large, collaborative public awareness campaign to allay fears of the outdoors showing the reality of the risks and the potential harm caused by NOT getting outdoors
Action taken collectively across all parties by forging creative partnerships with integrity and depth. Signpost and link up existing organisations better before developing new initiatives
Continue to pull together the academic evidence for a Natural Childhood and link this with the practitioners on the ground
Civil society groups, teachers and parents must have oportunities to communicate consistently with each other – community nature forums or pop-up sessions to ask for poeple's thoughts
Provide taster days
Provide subsidies and reduced fees for activities and travel, especially in deprived areas and for certain schools
NGOs and local Community groups working regularly with teachers and children in schools to build their confidence.
– Help to plan lessons and run outdoor classes
– Support training such as INSET days
– Take a supportive not leading role
Arrange transport networks to provide alternative transport methods to reach the countryside such as rural buses and minibuses
– Work with Forest Schools or Woodland Projects
– Ensure every school has a 'nature reserve'
– Link up with local farms for school trips
– Take elements of the Scandinavian model
– Regular outdoor classes and trips
– Lunchtime and Afterschool gardening clubs
– Walking / Cycling school 'buses'
– Tree planting schemes
– Nature spaces in playgrounds and school grounds
– Increase the length of playtimes back to to 90 minutes
– Use stories and videos as part of a wider initiative
– Teach children where food comes from and show them how to grow it in class time
– Make homework more interactive with the outdoors, not overly computer based or solitary
– Twin inner city schools with those in the country and vice versa
Encourage the promotion of young, charismatic outdoors role models for children who can relate to those who grew up in a city or urban area and speak in their language
Organise and promote communal food growing schemes
Organise annual car free days in towns and cities
Voluntary Community Wardens for parks and open green spaces to offer some supervision. Park Rangers in place in Scotland
Take activities to the families in their local areas. e.g. guided walks and activities. Show them how to use their local green space for play and learning, especially in urban areas

Recurring themes

A range of popular themes emerged from respondents:

1: Partnership working between NGOs, community groups and schools is critical

The most popular recommendation from respondents was that all organisations with an interest in engaging children in the outdoors need to support each other and work together more effectively. The resources and expertise that these organisations have could be used to provide after-school activities, supporting teachers on In Service Training (INSET) days, conducting learning initiatives with parents and teachers and co-leading activities in schools that fulfil the current National Curriculum criteria. We were told in one interview that:

'We need to share ideas on free, fun stuff to do outdoors.'

This was judged to have the knock-on effect of helping to inform the public about the outdoor provisions on offer. It was suggested that schools, community leaders and NGOs need to engage in consistent, in-depth dialogues and partnerships in order to do this. There was a sense that a great deal more needs to be done to link together these organisations through integrated communication strategies and creative partnerships with depth and integrity. For instance, one respondent told us this might involve:

'Connecting what provision already exists, creating a network that will enable our children to engage once again with the natural world.'

The reach and enabling role of community groups was noted as significant. As one respondent recommended:

'Community groups could play an active role in arranging activities, such as weekend/half-term nature trails specifically for grandparents and their grandchildren, enabling them to explore nature together.'

2. Schools can do a lot for themselves to help children get closer to nature

In addition to collaboration, many respondents felt that there was much that schools could do which could align well with the objectives of the schools themselves. The broad value of this was articulated by one institutional respondent:

'As well as informal contact with nature it is also important that our children understand the natural world and their school grounds are one of the best places they can do this. As every child has access to their school grounds this is an ideal way to get them interested in the world around them, including the natural world. We know that for urban schools this can be a challenge, but these are the children that have least contact with nature as a whole so they are key spaces for the increase of natural features and spaces. These spaces can also become community resources, spaces where children naturally feel safe and are able to access easily.'

Many other respondents likewise saw the need for all schools to have some natural green space set aside for children to explore during playtimes and in lunchtime and after-school clubs. Respondents suggested that these nature spots could be used for flower and vegetable growing, conducting lessons outside or going on insect hunts. One parent described how this was put into action in the *Guardian* online blog discussion:

'My son's nursery has put out a request for plants to "green" the outdoor space… The idea is that the kids get to see nature in a highly controlled environment that is safe for them – certainly it is artificial to some extent, but they will soon get their own plant to tend for and I think it will work.'

A participant in the *Guardian* online web chat emphasised the importance of this and told us that:

'Transforming the quality of all school landscapes into rich learning environments to meet the experiential learning and social development needs of our children is something we can all do something about.'

Inquiry respondents gave us many examples of cases where schools have successfully embraced nature within their school grounds. For example, one respondent told us:

'You have to start somewhere, and if it is more local, and even on an organised activity, to me it still counts.'

Similarly, a web chat participant who works with schools on sustainable building projects told us:

'Just from our own observations we notice that the children prefer the more natural things…as opposed to perfectly mown grass and some of the more standard play equipment.'

Beyond the use of school grounds, there were other suggestions as to how school could enable children to access nature during school time. For instance, Springfields Academy in Wiltshire told us how they have managed to incorporate outdoor learning and Forest Schools into their weekly schedules:

'We are presently developing a school farm and already invest heavily in local conservation work using forestry and run Forest School programmes as a way in to emotional literacy – we know this works!'

Similarly Erpingham Primary school in Norfolk has integrated a Forest School into their curriculum (see case study below).

At a more collective level, the London Empty Classroom Day showed how a high-profile event across a number of schools could be built into the school year (see case study below).

Case study: Erpingham Primary School

The school has two classes ranging in age from Reception to Year 6 children. Each week both classes get one afternoon a week in the Forest School area. In this time activities are presented to them in which they can learn more about the natural environment, as well as having a deeper understanding of plants, animals and insects and their relationship to one another. They are given the opportunity to understand risk by using tools, making fires, cooking and climbing trees. This in turn can develop the support of peers, develop self-confidence and improve low self-esteem.

The school also runs a group called Forest Friends for pre-school children one morning a week. Forest Friends is run with parents staying with their child for the duration of the session, discovering nature together. Our ethos is to go out in all weathers – even pouring rain. We have had den building where parent and child have enjoyed sharing a book in the den for a whole session. Last week we ate nettle soup and made origami butterflies on sticks and tried to hunt for real butterflies and insects amongst the nettles. We have had a bear hunt and we will be focusing this week's session around the 'Stick Man' book.

Forest Friends is also run in collaboration with Aylsham and Reepham Children's Centre and has been such a success that from September 2012 we will be running a further session for pre-school children with their parents.

Case study: London 'Empty Classroom Day'

The aim of Empty Classroom Day was to get every school in London on 6 July to spend the day learning outside the classroom in playgrounds, parks, farms and activity centres. Through the online network 'Project Dirt', a range of partners came together to promote this campaign, including London Sustainable Schools Forum, Farming and Countryside Education and Camley Street Natural Park, among others. The day was a huge success with over 100 schools across the country signing up to take part.

3. Information on opportunities for families and children to access nature is disjointed

A clear message from respondents was that individuals and families often don't know where to go to access green space or what they should or could do with children when they get there. This highlights a need to better signpost the available resources and organisations that can help to engage children with nature and the outdoors. One email respondent told us that:

'From our experiences working with local green spaces and attractions locally we have found that many of them are beautiful and offer lots of fun opportunities, but they are often hidden away, poorly advertised and badly interpreted/not interpreted for visitor access at all.'

To mitigate this, it was clear that more must be done to make this information accessible to all groups of people. For instance, another email suggestion told us that collective organisations should work to:

'Promote and signpost existing resources rather than reinvent the wheel.'

An example of work already being done in this area is the centralised database that Natural England is creating to help teachers and practitioners access information and resources to help engage children with the outdoors. Respondents also suggested that we need to market the free opportunities in nature and not just organised outdoor opportunities which require additional transport or may have a financial cost attached.

4. Nature organisations must be more proactive in promoting and taking nature to where people live

It was highly recommended that organisations with an interest in connecting families with nature should be as proactive as possible. Rather than waiting to be approached, it was suggested that organisations should actively seek and create opportunities to engage children 'where they are'. Popular suggestions included organising free guided walks, setting up nature activities in local areas and actively showing children how to use their local green spaces for nature exploration. One email respondent encouraged that we:

'Do things in people's community, rather than places that are difficult to get to. Show them the wild places on their doorstep.'

A similar suggestion was that organisations should work together to support networks which offer people a direct link to outdoor nature hotspots. Additionally, to make people feel more comfortable in the outdoors, clubs and societies could conduct frequent taster days to offer people a 'safe way in' to a new activity. We were told that:

'People looking for somewhere to go need a "way in" physically and emotionally… we can't rely on people coming to us; we need to actively reach out.'

This intervention went hand in hand with encouraging parents and children to see the free opportunities to engage with nature, without having to travel too far to experience it.

6. The role of policy-makers

The Natural Childhood inquiry asked participants to consider:

What policy changes are needed to ensure that every child has the opportunity to develop a personal connection with the natural world?

With the ability to approve and launch large-scale, nationwide campaigns, government officials and policy-makers were recognised as having an invaluable role to play in making changes a reality. It was noted that not only do policy-makers have the ability to codify and enact legislation, and bring public resources together, but they are also in a unique position to give high-profile support to campaigns launched at other levels in society.

The role that inquiry participants thought that government and policy-makers should play was summarised very succinctly in the following response:

'We need clear direction from our leaders… Our leaders need to speak up for nature – just like we are trying to do for children's rights – it's time to give nature a voice and enforce this.'

Figure 4, overleaf, summarises the range of issues raised in relation to this question.

Recurring themes

The following themes emerged most frequently from the responses we received in the Natural Childhood inquiry:

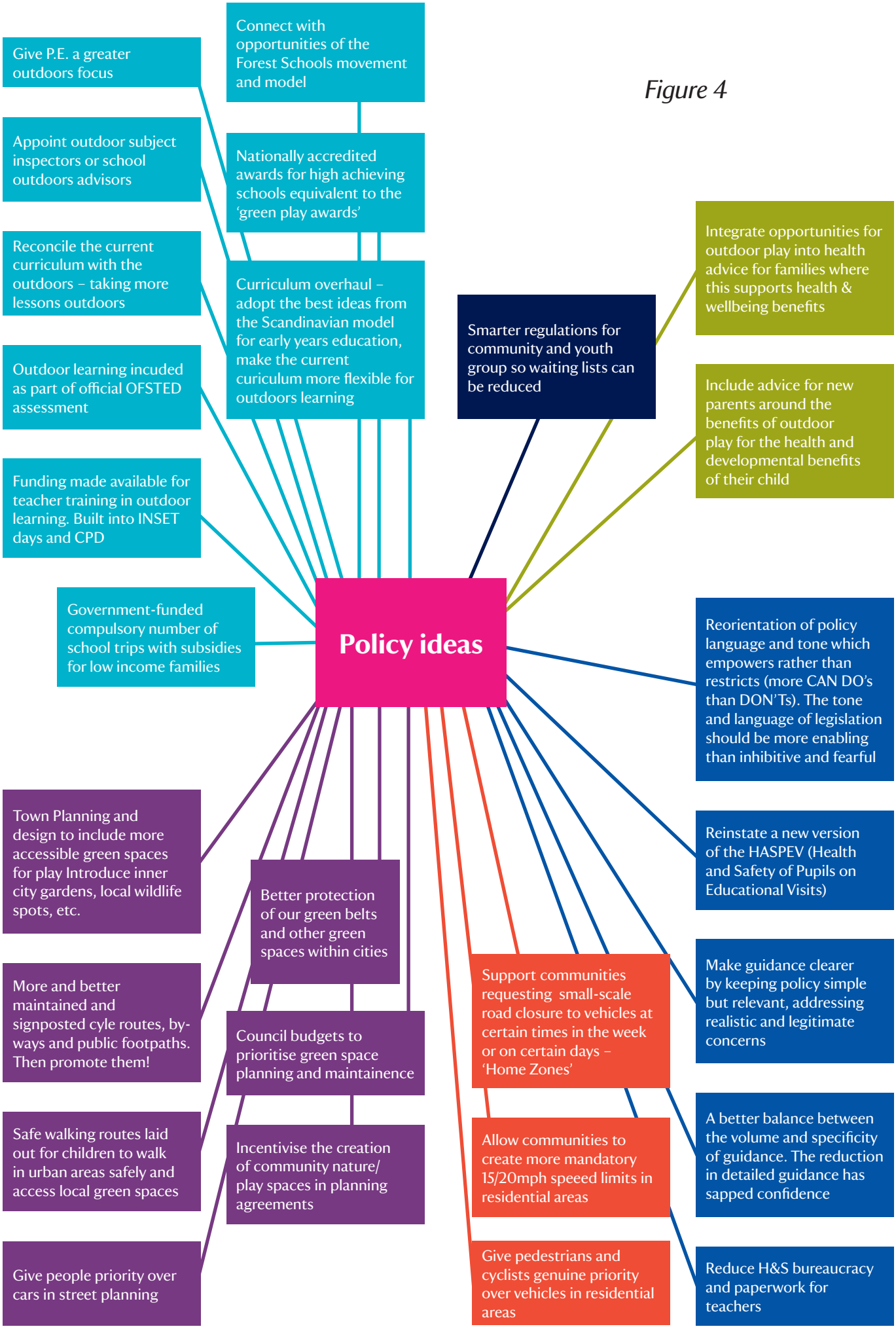
1. There is a need to continue to improve access to quality green spaces

There was concern from many respondents that there are too few green and natural spaces available for children to play in. As explained above, exposure to green and natural spaces on a regular basis has been shown to have positive effects on both children's mental and physical health and well-being.[3] Respondents told us that access to green spaces around many residential areas is particularly difficult and have cited both the reduced quantity and quality of natural green spaces as a crucial barrier to the outdoors.

To resolve this, numerous respondents told us that the government must do much more to ensure that town planners, developers and architects recognise issues around access to nature and natural play when designing urban spaces.

[3] Pretty, J. et al (2009) Nature, Childhood, Health and Life Pathways. Interdisciplinary Centre for Environment and Society, Occasional Paper 2009-2, University of Essex.

Figure 4


Policy ideas
Give P.E. a greater outdoors focus
Connect with opportunities of the Forest Schools movement and model
Appoint outdoor subject inspectors or school outdoors advisors
Nationally accredited awards for high achieving schools equivalent to the 'green play awards'
Reconcile the current curriculum with the outdoors – taking more lessons outdoors
Curriculum overhaul – adopt the best ideas from the Scandinavian model for early years education, make the current curiculum more flexible for outdoors learning
Outdoor learning incuded as part of official OFSTED assessment
Funding made available for teacher training in outdoor learning. Built into INSET days and CPD
Government-funded compulsory number of school trips with subsidies for low income families
Integrate opportunities for outdoor play into health advice for families where this supports health & wellbeing benefits
Smarter regulations for community and youth group so waiting lists can be reduced
Include advice for new parents around the benefits of outdoor play for the health and developmental benefits of their child
Reorientation of policy language and tone which empowers rather than restricts (more CAN DO's than DON'Ts). The tone and language of legislation should be more enabling than inhibitive and fearful
Reinstate a new version of the HASPEV (Health and Safety of Pupils on Educational Visits)
Make guidance clearer by keeping policy simple but relevant, addressing realistic and legitimate concerns
A better balance between the volume and specificity of guidance. The reduction in detailed guidance has sapped confidence
Reduce H&S bureaucracy and paperwork for teachers
Support communities requesting small-scale road closure to vehicles at certain times in the week or on certain days – 'Home Zones'
Allow communities to create more mandatory 15/20mph speeed limits in residential areas
Give pedestrians and cyclists genuine priority over vehicles in residential areas
Town Planning and design to include more accessible green spaces for play Introduce inner city gardens, local wildlife spots, etc.
Better protection of our green belts and other green spaces within cities
More and better maintained and signposted cyle routes, by-ways and public footpaths. Then promote them!
Council budgets to prioritise green space planning and maintainence
Safe walking routes laid out for children to walk in urban areas safely and access local green spaces
Incentivise the creation of community nature/ play spaces in planning agreements
Give people priority over cars in street planning

Respondents were clear that provision for green, natural spaces and safe access routes to them should not be an afterthought. For example, participants in the Guardian online web chat told us that 'planners need to design places for people, not car drivers', and that the government must aim 'to incorporate imaginative green spaces that beckon children where people live'.

Numerous respondents noted the presence of inequalities between poorer and wealthier areas' access to natural and green outdoor space. This has been reinforced by recent research which highlights the patchy, uneven distribution of green spaces.[4] It was felt on the whole that the government, locally and nationally, needs to do more to create and maintain safe and local natural green spaces for children to access regularly.

2. Children's education can benefit from giving more space for nature in the National Curriculum

An overwhelming number of respondents felt that there should be more opportunities to include outdoor learning and nature into the curriculum in more formal and regular ways. It was recognised that this could be a very challenging task to implement, but it was felt that in the long run, this could yield some of the most long-lasting benefits for children. A representative from the NUT told us that:

'The key issue is teachers having the flexibility and space in the school timetable to be able to embrace this type of learning.'

There was a range of different suggestions for how nature's inclusion in the curriculum could be approached. Many respondents favoured the principles of the Scandinavian schooling ethos. In the Scandinavian system children are not placed into 'formal' education until the age of seven and are encouraged to learn through child-led, semi-structured play in the outdoors with parents and teachers. One email respondent told us that we should also use this Scandinavian ethos:

'To guide our parenting to engage children in nature from an early age.'

Another popular suggestion was that a certain number of government-funded field trips and outdoor lessons should be made mandatory for all schools each year:

'What about funding for every single child in the country to have a week-long residential at an activity centre as part of the National Curriculum?'

Hand in hand with curriculum inclusion, the majority of these respondents also specified that there should be better means for assessing the quality of children's outdoor education through Ofsted assessments. It was recognised that this would require allotted funding and training from the government, but the resounding consensus was that this would be an exceedingly worthwhile investment.

[4] Natural England (2011) Summary of evidence: Access and Engagement.

A youth engagement organisation summarised well the main messages in the arguments we received:

'We'd like to have seen more emphasis on the benefits of learning outside the classroom in the 2011 Education Act. Ofsted research confirms that children actually prefer learning outside the classroom. We believe it adds value to classroom learning and the Department for Education agree. We think schools should have a statutory duty to provide this opportunity.'

3. Clearer health and safety guidance alongside an emphatic shift to a benefit/risk health and safety culture is needed

There were high levels of agreement that complicated and unclear health and safety guidelines were discouraging parents, teachers and outdoor learning practitioners from taking trips outdoors into nature. Therefore a frequently cited request was for policy-makers to establish a better balance between the volume and specificity of health and safety guidance. While reducing the length of these guidelines may make policy language more accessible, they must still retain their specificity to instil confidence in parents and outdoor learning practitioners. A representative from a teaching union emphasised that there must be more clarity on the most realistic and legitimate concerns to focus upon as:

'Health and safety regulations, insofar as their application to school practical work is concerned, are not always well understood by teachers, or local authority safety advisers.'

In conjunction with this, many respondents urged that the government should aim to re-orient health and safety language as a whole to endorse 'benefit/risk' as opposed to 'zero-risk' assessments. A participant in the *Guardian* online web chat told us that:

'Nature is being zoned. "Swim only in marked area." "Don't throw stones." "No fires." No wonder kids don't want to go outdoors, they aren't allowed to do anything when they get there.'

It was felt that government and local authorities should relax the tone of their language to be more enabling and empowering than restrictive. For example, one expert interviewee in the field of risk analysis told us that:

'The tide is beginning to turn but more could be done to help this.'

It was felt by many respondents that the language and approach of local authorities regarding health and safety is still overly cautious and prohibitive. As an example of how this could be resolved, one email respondent told us:

'We can be clever with our messages. Less "don't play on the grass" signs and more wild places that aren't tightly mown and perfectly planted. Less fences around "dangerous" sites…and less labelling of spaces as "play areas" (implying the rest of the park or site is not for playing).'

4. Streets can be made safer for outdoor play

Hand in hand with concerns over access to green and natural spaces, many respondents saw the need for government and local authorities to make the streets safer by reducing the danger from excessive traffic. While one respondent from the *Guardian* online web chat told us that:

'Blaming cars for everything (global warming, lack of play, obesity etc. etc.) is lazy thinking, and hopelessly impractical.'

Many others argued that traffic posed a serious barrier to the outdoors for children.

In the *Guardian* online web chat one participant told us that:

'We need to get traffic out of more places to provide safe places for children to play – then parents may feel more confident in letting children play outside again.'

For numerous respondents, the best way that this could be reduced would be the use of:

'Mandatory traffic speeds of 15 or 20 mph in residential zones/streets adjacent to schools.'

Other measures which were suggested included encouraging greater respect for the road through experiential road safety lessons for children rather than simply learning about it through videos and online. A particularly popular way of reducing the real and perceived danger from traffic was a nationwide programme of residential 'home zones' or car-free areas which restrict cars from accessing certain roads at particular times of day. One practical grassroots response cited the use of limited street closure as achieved for Playing Out (see case study overleaf).

5. Grassroots community initiatives need continued support

Despite the economic climate of austerity, it was clear that many saw the need for continued funding support for community initiatives which supported family and children's access to nature. One email respondent reminded us how:

'UNICEF UK called for the government to maintain its funding for free local outdoor play spaces for children…access to nature at no cost should be the right of every child in this country.'

One outdoor practitioner reiterated this by telling us how:

'Funding is the most important barrier that we find.'

Another told us how:

'There are already many fantastic initiatives in place. They are however constantly struggling for funding to grow and develop.'

While funding is an important component of support, government leaders would do well to accompany monetary assistance with vocal endorsements, encouraging local communities to champion their local nature organisations too. The sometimes transient nature of financial support was recognised by our respondents; however, the undeniable need for this still remained strong:

'In the short term (government) funding projects that work directly with young people and families…is a clear way forward.'

Case study: Playing Out

Playing Out was started by Bristol neighbours Alice Ferguson and Amy Rose who began by just holding Playing Out sessions on their own street. Playing Out is now a Community Interest Company steered by a core team of four – all parents – that helps other individuals and organisations across the UK to hold their own sessions.

Playing Out's vision is simply that children across the UK are able to play safely on the streets where they live. They do this by turning busy residential streets from a problem into part of the solution, holding after-school play sessions where car access is restricted and residents take turns to 'steward'. To make this possible Playing Out Bristol has worked closely with Bristol City Council to pilot a 'Temporary Play Street' scheme, enabling residents to do this up to once a week. Although adults take a role in coordinating and supervising the street closures, the focus is on allowing child-led free play.

Testimonies from their website:

'I felt on a real high afterwards and had a sense of personal achievement.'

'Everyone seemed to really enjoy it...we had lots of people saying "let's do this every month" and several saying "let's do this once a week"...so lots and lots of enthusiasm and lots of fun on the day.'

7. Setting the right tone

Among the suggestions received in the Natural Childhood inquiry, many respondents offered recommendations as to how we should *approach* the task of bringing children back in touch with nature and the outdoors. For many, it was clear that the 'how' of connecting children mattered as much as the 'what'.

Recommendations suggested our tone of language should:

- Be realistic and open minded. We shouldn't lose sight of the complexities of this debate and in no way advocate to have found 'the only answers'.
- Move away from the phrase Nature Deficit Disorder – 'medicalising' this issue could lead people to take a fatalistic attitude to the problem and distract people from the solutions at hand.
- Avoid using language that implies blame, which may leave some feeling victimised. Instead, language should convey empowerment and opportunities for simple action rather than correction.
- Be wary of making assumptions or generalisations about the experiences of those in cities and rural areas which may reinforce superficial distinctions.

Respondents suggested that solutions should:

- Be actively inclusive. We need to find ways of reaching out to disadvantaged areas and all ethnic groups and demographics in ways that they can relate to, but without reinforcing social distinctions which make them feel targeted.
- Distinguish between the different 'ages of childhood'. Children aged 1–5 will have very different learning requirements and interests from children aged 6–11. Therefore the solutions we offer must recognise and account for these differences.
- Be ambitious but not unrealistic – ensure that we propose practical solutions that are achievable.
- Remember that going outdoors and connecting with nature are not the same thing. In many cases nature connectedness may begin with getting kids outdoors, but we shouldn't lose sight of the deeper aim, and potential benefits, of a connection with nature.
- Don't reinforce a 'hierarchy of experience'. There is much value to be found in unstructured, child-led play in gardens and small green spaces near home.

8. Conclusions: joining it all together

Looking across the barriers – and the responses to our questions about the roles of individuals, communities, organisations and policy-makers – revealed that intervention is needed in many areas of children's lives.

Our analysis of inquiry responses suggested that four main dimensions stand out as significantly shaping children's opportunities and quality of experiences in accessing nature. In each area there appears to be a key task coming through clearly from respondents:

Dimension	Task
1. Education and learning	Grow the role of nature as part of the everyday school experience
2. Nature spaces	Grow, promote and better connect the network of accessible child- and family-friendly nature play spaces in every community
3. Risk and fear	Rapidly adopt a benefit/risk approach across all sectors and support the need for adventure in children's lives
4. Family life	Promote nature and outdoor play as a fun part of a healthy, happy and enjoyable family life

In each dimension, the respondents indicated the following opportunities for change or issues which need to be addressed:

– **Education and learning:** the inquiry identified significant challenges to be overcome in finding enough time and space within the curriculum and school grounds to connect children and nature. But it is clear from respondents that there are many opportunities to achieve a connection with nature and the outdoors within the ordinary school day, and in ways which create a wide range other benefits which schools are trying to pursue. Respondents were clear that schools can afford to be bolder in taking nature into their school grounds, in taking more learning outdoors, and drawing on the passionate champions for nature that were likely to be found amongst staff.

  The respondents also signalled that there is room for stronger collaboration between environmental and other community organisations in supporting schools in growing the nature experience within every children's education and learning.

Respondents saw much room for policy shifts which would enable this, such as within new and ongoing teacher training, Ofsted inspections, risk/benefit policies and funding for opportunities to take children out of the classroom.

– **Nature spaces:** the need to ensure that every family and every child has access to child-friendly natural spaces came through clearly from respondents. Within this it was clear that issues around safety of accessibility (especially around traffic) and proximity of access need to be addressed, and issues around inequality of access should be recognised.

  The respondents also saw room for environmental organisations and other landowning organisations to be better at joining up and marketing their network of spaces in a way that was easier for parents to understand and use. The call from respondents was to make the job for parents, grandparents, teachers and community groups much easier in finding natural places and experiences for their children close to home by making the information much more audience-focused.

– **Risk and fear:** the pervasiveness of this force within society was reinforced by respondents. The clearest recommendations from respondents were an emphatic shift to a benefit/risk approach across all sectors that connected with children's potential to experience and enjoy the outdoors and nature. This requires political support and, as some respondents acknowledged, changes of culture within their own organisations and networks.

  More challenging perhaps was the signal from respondents of the need better to equip parents in making assessments of benefits versus risks. Similarly clear, yet challenging, was the need for a different balance to be struck in the way that media commentators talked about health and safety, and risk and benefits.

– **Family life:** the power of family life in shaping children's experiences was perhaps the most emphatic message underlined by respondents. The need to create a different story around how nature enriches family life, rather than it feeling like a chore or requiring access to exotic wild places, came through very clearly. Enabling this through considering opportunities around guidance and support for parents – especially new parents – perhaps delivered through the health system appeared to be important.

  Allied to this, respondents signalled the need for a better 'marketing pitch' and approach for nature. The challenge acknowledged by the inquiry respondents was in finding clear language that focused on how families can benefit, communicating this in terms which made sense to children and parents. It was also clear that the messages needed to cut through on the same scale as the brands with which nature is competing for attention. Most of all there was a strong message that a connection with nature in children's lives should be viewed and communicated simply as an opportunity for playfulness and fun.

Working at scale and in partnership

Finally, what was especially clear from respondents was the need for a collaborative and large-scale effort across these different dimensions: actions are required in concert at the individual, community, organisational and political levels. Indeed respondents were clear that no single organisation would be able to address the overarching issue of children's growing disconnection with nature, and that a wider multi-partner, multi-faceted approach is needed if we are to make a real and enduring difference for current and future generations of children.

Acknowledgements

The National Trust would like to thank all those who found time to respond to the inquiry, and those who gave further time in our follow-up interviews and questions.

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We would also like to thank our partners who have worked with us in developing ideas around a broader Natural Childhood campaign, in particular: the NHS Sustainable Development Unit; Play England, Play Wales and Playboard NI; RSPB; Arla Foods; BRITDOC; and Green Lions.

We would also like to thank Stephen Moss for his work on our original Natural Childhood report and continued support as we progressed our inquiry.

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