



Department
for Education

National Education Nature Park

Process evaluation, research report

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Executive Summary

The National Education Nature Park (“Nature Park”)¹ is a new and untested whole school natural environmental programme, open to all nurseries, schools and colleges in England. The programme was commissioned by the Department for Education (DfE) and developed and delivered in a partnership with the Natural History Museum and the Royal Horticultural Society. It intends to transform the way climate education is taught; support young people to connect with nature and take climate-positive actions; and increase biodiversity of school grounds. Nature Park forms a key part of the DfE’s Sustainability and Climate Change Strategy and sits alongside the Climate Ambassadors² scheme and the Sustainability Support for Education online service³.

The programme launched nationwide in the academic year 2023/24, with supported rollout in five regions of England. Support was extended to all regions in England in the academic year 2024/25. In addition to the programme funding, grant funding⁴ was made available to encourage pre-selected education settings in areas of green deprivation to engage with the Nature Park programme.

The Nature Park programme provides a suite of resources for educators to use and adapt to embed nature-based learning in the curriculum. It is non-prescriptive in its design, but recommends a five step-plan for settings to follow:

- 1. Getting to know your space:** pupils familiarise themselves with their school grounds, collecting and recording habitat data using Geographic Information System technology.
- 2. Identifying opportunities:** based on the data collected, pupils identify opportunities to enhance green spaces and increase the biodiversity of the school grounds.
- 3. Making decisions:** pupils make a clear plan for school ground improvements.
- 4. Making change happen:** pupils work on their school ground project, including planting, growing, creating new habits, and raising awareness of their work.
- 5. Recording change:** pupils monitor and record biodiversity improvements to the school grounds.

This report was commissioned to provide an independent review of the early stages of the programme to inform continuous improvement. We hope that these findings provide insight to support programmes with similar aims.

¹ [Home | Education Nature Park](#)

² [Climate Ambassadors: Turning Climate Ambition into Climate Action in Education | Climate Ambassadors](#)

³ [Sustainability Support for Education](#)

⁴ [National Education Nature Park grant funding - GOV.UK](#)

Process evaluation method

Ecorys UK delivered a process evaluation to gather learning on programme implementation across education settings in Year 1 (January – July 2024) and Year 2 (September 2024-July 2025) of the Nature Park. The evaluation provided an evidence base of what good implementation looks like for education settings and pupils and perceived progress towards achieving the programme outcomes and impacts. It also assessed the value for money (VfM) of the programme. The mixed method process evaluation included:

- **interviews with strategic and operational programme leads**, including: two DfE programme leads, nine programme delivery staff, and 12 programme regional delivery team/leads.
- **deep-dive case studies in education settings**, involving educator and pupil interviews/focus groups, and observations of Nature Park activities. Case studies were carried out with:
 - **five settings which registered in Year 2 of the programme** (including one early years setting, two primary schools, one secondary school and one alternative provision setting); and
 - **four settings which registered in Year 1 of the programme** (including one early years setting, one primary school, and two secondary schools).
- **additional follow-up interviews were conducted with five settings from the Year 1 process evaluation** (including one early years setting, two primary schools, and two secondary schools).
- a **teacher survey** distributed to the lead educator who registered for the programme in each participating setting (n=564; an 11% response rate).
- a **survey of non-participating settings** who had not taken up the grant, spent the funding, or mapped their site boundary (n=99), with **eight follow-up interviews** conducted with survey respondents.
- analysis of **programme management information** including on registered settings and educators, their engagement, as well as grant take-up and spend.
- consultations with **other projects in the Sustainability Support Programme (SSP)**, including **three interviews** with the DfE, the leads for the Climate Ambassadors scheme and Sustainability Support for Education online service, an interview with a Let's Go Zero campaign lead who work alongside the SSP, and **secondary data analysis** of settings registered to SSP programmes.
- **Interviews with Nature Park pilot affiliates**: Manchester Metropolitan University, Climate Adapted Pathways for Education (CAPE), The Tree Council and Earthwatch.

Key findings

The key findings from the process evaluation across Year 1 and 2 Nature Park delivery are outlined below.

Programme reach, awareness and recruitment

- By the end of July 2025, **7,378 education settings had registered to the programme**, far exceeding the target (n=6,000) and more than doubling the equivalent total at the end of Year 1. **Primary schools accounted for the majority of registered settings** (64%). There was also a notable minority (38%) of settings with higher-than-average eligibility level for Pupil Premium (PP) and free school meals (FSM), driven by the grant programme.
- Despite increases in grant take-up by Year 2 of the programme, there was a **rise in non-grant settings who registered to the programme**, accounting for 81% of all settings.
- Many registered settings had prior involvement with other nature related programmes, like Forest Schools⁵ and Eco Schools⁶, though more than **a third had no prior involvement in any nature-related programmes**. Non-grant settings were less likely to participate in other nature-related programmes compared to grant settings.
- The most common way settings found out about Nature Park was via **word of mouth** followed by **communications from the DfE and programme partners**. More than twice the number of settings heard about the programme via **social media** in Year 2 compared to Year 1.
- **The Nature Park's regional teams played an influential role in recruiting settings**, having improved their ways of working and widened their networks. This was bolstered by collaboration with other projects within the SSP and pilot affiliate organisations.
- **The main motivations to register were to improve the school grounds, to provide opportunities for pupils to develop skills, and to improve learners' wellbeing**. Environmental ambitions were also important, namely improving nature in the local area and responding to young people's concerns about environmental issues. The impetus on settings to develop a **Climate Action Plan**⁷ had become another motivating factor to register for Nature Park in Year 2.
- **The main barrier to participation was insufficient space in the timetable for delivery**, with some settings also reporting concerns around **staff time and interest** and **a lack of equipment and resources** to deliver outdoor learning.

⁵ [What is Forest School? | Forest School Association](#)

⁶ [Eco-Schools | Keep Britain Tidy](#)

⁷ [Sustainability leadership and climate action plans in education - GOV.UK](#)

Alignment to the wider climate education landscape

- Representatives from the other projects within the SSP and affiliates raised awareness of Nature Park and other DfE environmental programmes through **communications, events, webinars and direct work with settings**, which was seen as an effective mechanism for driving SSP and Nature Park programme registrations.
- The Nature Park delivery team was able to **draw on the local knowledge and connections of SSP and affiliates to widen their reach into settings**.
- **There was considerable overlap between settings registered to Nature Park and other DfE sister projects**, with Nature Park settings also participating in the Sustainability Support for Education online service (45%) and Climate Ambassadors (44%) schemes – though interviews suggested there could still be confusion amongst settings around the different SSP and wider climate action programme options available to them.
- The Nature Park programme team and SSP teams highlighted the need for clear resources, provided by the DfE, to clearly explain each SSP programme's purpose, differences, and how they connect. They felt a user journey guide for education settings was currently missing.
- The **SSP and pilot affiliate network** was seen by programme staff as enhancing the support available for settings with nature-related activities and climate action planning and strengthening the Nature Park programme's message.
- Programme teams suggested that better support for settings' Sustainability Leads could improve engagement with the SSP, as their roles are often overlooked or misunderstood. The lack of continued professional development, formal recognition, and peer networks was seen as limiting both the appeal and effectiveness of the role.
- Whilst there were several instances of effective ways of working between the Nature Park regional teams and the SSP and pilot affiliate network, levels of joint working could vary between regions as it was largely based on personal relationships which were vulnerable to variation and to staff turnover.

Programme grant

- DfE announced £15 million of grant funding in October 2023 with c.1700 pre-selected education settings eligible across the first two application windows (Year 1 and 2). By July 2025, **over £12 million had been released to just over 1200 education settings**. DfE have announced a third application round in academic year 2025/26 to support 1,008 new eligible settings to access £3 million funding.

- **Just under half (43%, n=1,269) of grant-eligible settings applied and received funding** across the two years. Most settings received close to the maximum amount of £10,000 with only 17% receiving less than £9,000.
- **Primary schools accounted for three-quarters of the total grant take-up** (76%, £5.2 million). The proportion of secondary schools receiving grants rose slightly from 8% in Year 1 to 11% in Year 2. Early years settings received 3% of the total grant funding in Year 2, down from 8%.
- In Year 2, top-up grants of up to £2,000 were available to 533 settings who received grant funding the previous year. In total, **365 top-up grants were awarded**, with an average grant size of £1,966.
- In Year 2 the grant was announced earlier in the academic year, allowing for **earlier communication with settings and time for regional teams to support** with enquiries and grant applications. Programme staff reflected this enabled more settings to apply in Year 2 compared with Year 1.
- However, many eligible settings **did not take up the grant due to staff limited capacity, competing priorities and concern that the grant offer was fraudulent**, which limited applications and grant take-up. Whilst the **timescales** to meet the grant requirements were less compressed in Year 2 than in Year 1, some settings still struggled to align the grant with internal planning cycles or to complete the habitat mapping requirement in time.
- **By July 2025, the total grant value applied for by settings was nearly £12m, however only £10.6m of the funds were expended** due to interventions still in-progress. The majority of funding was spent on biodiversity interventions, followed by specialist support, which overall saw an overspend from settings – though fewer settings used their funding to access external support in Year 2 compared to Year 1. Settings reported the largest underspends in biodiversity interventions and fieldwork equipment.
- Most settings used the grants to improve biodiversity and make improvements to their school grounds. According to the grant school survey, 69% (n=680) of settings used the grant to **buy new equipment/capital**, whilst 43% (n=426) used the grant to **buy both new equipment as well as upgrade existing equipment**.
- Educators generally reported that the **grant application process was straightforward**, with feedback suggesting the process was more accessible and better supported than in Year 1. This was supported by clearer communications, including an eligibility checklist and expanded frequently asked questions.
- Yet, a number of educators needed **support in interpreting the guidance**, as some continued to encounter uncertainty over how costs should be presented and what expenditure was eligible. **Support from the regional teams continued to be vital** in supporting some settings through their grant application.

Programme implementation

- Nature Park activities were most commonly delivered as part of classroom activities (66%, n=262) and extra-curricular clubs (45%, n=178). **Settings were less likely to take a whole school approach** (26%, n=102), though evidence suggests that settings who participated in the programme for longer were more likely to do so.
- **All setting types generally ran activities with younger pupil cohorts.** According to the teacher survey, pupils with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) were included in Nature Park activities in nearly a quarter of settings (23% n=131).
- According to the teacher survey, where settings linked activities to the curriculum, Nature Park was by far most commonly delivered as part of **science** (79%, n=206) followed by **geography** (53%, n=138) and **citizenship** (39%, n=102). Activities were less likely to be integrated within maths or English.
- More registered settings have started running Nature Park activities compared to last year. Of the settings that had started delivery, **30% (n=162) ran Nature Park activities at least once a week, 17% (n=92) delivered at least monthly, and 31% (n=166) did so once or twice per term.** Grant schools tended to run activities more frequently than non-grant settings, and settings who were involved since Year 1 reported increasing the frequency of programme delivery.
- There has been a **high level of engagement with the Nature Park** website and five-step process which were overall well-received by educators. Some educators struggled to navigate the website.
- The majority of teacher survey respondents **found the learning resources easy to use in practice** (85%, n=258), with only 9% (n=26) reporting any difficulty. There was widespread evidence that educators across education stages **adapted resources**, tailoring these to the curriculum or to make them age-appropriate, particularly for early years, Key Stage 4 and 5 pupils.
- Nearly three quarters of teacher survey respondents who **had used the digital tools found them easy to use** (72%, n=251). Most settings had only engaged with the site boundary and habitat mapping tools, with some struggling with the technical nature of the task or with accessing the technology. **Pupils using these tools tended to be older**, with early years settings reporting that involving younger pupils in these activities was challenging. Specifically, early years educators stated this digital task was not age-appropriate, and that devices distracted children from nature-based activities.
- Educators with limited environment subject expertise suggested a need for **training and resources** to improve their confidence in environment-specific topics and teaching outdoors. They would welcome the opportunity to **share best**

practice examples with other settings, and for the **website to be easier to navigate** with less adaptation needed for specific resources.

Educator and pupil engagement

- **Programme engagement was often limited to an enthusiastic educator.** Settings with **strong buy-in from their senior leadership teams** engaged more educators, who were often afforded more time to plan and trial Nature Park activities.
- More than half of educators (62%, n=226) reported feeling fairly or very confident in delivering the programme activities. **Confidence levels were reported to increase over time** and were highest amongst grant settings, and educators who previously delivered outdoor learning.
- In contrast, the main barrier to engagement was amongst educators who were concerned about **taking their pupils outside and teaching new subject knowledge** they were unfamiliar with, while also managing pupil behaviour.
- **Pupils had engaged in a variety of ways with Nature Park activities and enjoyed learning outdoors.** This was particularly valued amongst settings whose pupils may have limited access to the outdoors away from school. Educators noted how well the Nature Park activities engaged those with SEND or behavioural difficulties who may struggle to engage in a classroom-based setting.
- There was **little evidence of a pupil-led inquiry approach being used**, with two thirds of settings (65%, n=236) delivering mostly teacher-led activities. Educators lacked the time, skills and confidence to adopt this approach in combination with outdoor learning. However, feedback suggested that pupil engagement increased when they participated in hands-on activities and took ownership and responsibility over activities such as school ground improvements.

Self-reported programme outcomes

- Those involved in the programme perceived **a range of positive outcomes for pupils, educators and whole school communities**, as a result of Nature Park participation. These outcomes tended to be limited to the pupils who actively participated in the Nature Park, though a number of settings did report whole school benefits of school ground improvements.
- In the teacher survey, the five **main reported benefits of participating in Nature Park** activities for both pupils and educators were: more time spent in nature, improved school grounds, increased wellbeing, increased knowledge about biodiversity and climate change and more lessons about biodiversity and climate change.

- Outcomes around **care and connection with the environment** and more **lessons about biodiversity and climate change** were identified more by Year 1 settings. Conversely, **improved digital skills** was an outcome more commonly reported by Year 2 settings.
- Longer-term programme outcomes of **increased environmental science agency**, adoption of **pro-conservation behaviour** and **stronger science identity** were identified less at this stage, but progress towards these was evident.
- **Pupil outcomes** could vary between setting types, according to the case studies:
 - Nature Park activities encouraged a curiosity and fascination with the natural environment amongst **early years pupils** which helped to foster environmental responsibility to take forward into primary school. The activities supported language development and emotional and behaviour regulation amongst some pupils.
 - **Primary settings** emphasised pupils' enjoyment of Nature Park activities, with educators noting positive engagement especially amongst pupils who struggled with concentration and behaviour in classrooms. Pupils involved in school ground improvements developed a sense of teamwork and confidence in communicating their ideas and care and concern for their immediate environment.
 - Programme benefits were confined to smaller numbers of **secondary school pupils** who participated in Nature Park activities. Educators reported that pupils involved in biodiversity improvements saw a sense of pride and ownership of these spaces, and motivation to take further positive climate related actions.
 - One **alternative provision** case study setting identified that opportunities for outdoor learning contributed to emotional regulation strategies, improved behaviour and staying at school. It also allowed pupils and educators to develop relationships outside the classroom.
- **School ground improvements were cited as a key facilitator to achieving outcomes**, often supported by Nature Park grant funding. Outcomes were more commonly observed amongst those who **actively participated in the activities**, which was more likely to be in settings where there was an enthusiastic lead educator, and which participated in wider environmental initiatives.

Value for Money (VfM)

- **The available evidence suggests that the programme is on course to provide Value for Money.** However, given the programme is only in Year 2, it is **too early to fully assess VfM**, especially given there has not been sufficient time to for the longer-term outcomes to be observed.

- **The grant funding mostly covered programme delivery costs for grant settings**, though a small amount of additional funding and in-kind contributions (such as volunteer time) were needed to deliver the programme, which settings had to source through additional funding streams.
- **The majority of programme key performance indicators set for the end of July 2025 were achieved or surpassed**, suggesting it has achieved good VfM.
- **The programme reached its intended audience**, surpassing targets for registrations among eligible education settings. Reach was evenly distributed amongst regions, whilst the grant facilitated participation amongst settings in more disadvantaged areas. Awareness of and participation in the Nature Park programme was also facilitated by **employing regional teams and combining efforts with other SSP programmes and delivery affiliates**, all of which built on established networks.
- Additionally, **the wider outcomes of the programme are on track to be achieved**, with most interviewees attributing benefits to the programme directly. In particular, educators from grant settings noted that they would not have been able to carry out environmental actions without the funding.
- Whilst there was no evidence that costs could have been lowered without reducing the outcomes of the programme, small tweaks to the programme could further enhance its value – such as providing additional guidance to early years and SEND settings and providing training and learning opportunities for educators.

Future implementation and sustainability

- Programme staff reflected that the higher the take-up of the programme, the more sustainable it will become. They recommended that the programme **continues its focus on growth by raising awareness** amongst new settings, and more staff within existing settings, by effectively communicating the programme's breadth and making it clear it can align with settings' existing priorities and activities.
- Within participating settings, it will be important to **encourage multiple educators to register to the programme** rather than rely on a single point of contact. Programme staff and educators stressed the importance of buy-in from senior leadership and of providing training and learning opportunities to educators to boost their confidence.
- As the programme matures, it will be important to **build on settings' initial involvement and motivate them to (continue to) participate in more programme activities to deepen engagement**. Clearer signposting and targeted communications on next steps for settings at different stages of engagement were identified as key facilitators.

- Programme improvements made to the website and planned changes for next year - included **settings to access and use their own data** - were hoped to strengthen engagement amongst participating settings.

Conclusion

Throughout the first two years of delivery, the Nature Park delivery team have remained reflective on the best ways to support settings and educators to engage and make implementation easy. The team have delivered a range of changes informed by educator feedback, with regards to marketing, simplifying registrations and grant applications, refining resources and website, as well as increasing on the ground support for settings. This iterative approach has supported the programme's success, underpinned by effective leadership and collaboration across Nature Park partners. By the end of Year 2, the programme has a clear design and effective implementation approach, educators and pupils remain interested and enthusiastic about being part of the programme and taking positive climate actions, providing a solid foundation for future and ongoing delivery.



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