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A SENSE OF OWNERSHIP

FOSTERING A CHANGE IN THE
RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PEOPLE
& THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT



Learning from projects that have found ways to foster a sense of ownership of the natural environment amongst individuals, groups and communities



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ABOUT THIS PAPER

Welcome to this Learning Paper, one of four in the third series of papers. **Here we focus on one of the core aspects of the Access to Nature programme – building ownership of the natural environment by individuals, groups and communities.**

The third series of papers uses information gathered from well established projects and follows on from Access to Nature's early findings papers. These papers are being produced across the lifetime of Access to Nature and demonstrate what is being learnt about encouraging people who have little or no experience of the natural environment to go out into the outdoors. They also provide insights into the running of a programme such as this. This includes messages which seek to inform the continuing work of Access to Nature projects and the work of other organisations interested in or committed to this kind of work. More Learning Papers will be produced in the final phase of Access to Nature and as we build on our learning to date.

THE CURRENT CONTEXT

The current political agenda parallels the goals of many of the Access to Nature projects. The vision for a Big Society focuses on a belief that people should be empowered to improve their communities and shape the services they receive. The three core strands of the Localism agenda – promoting social action in communities; empowering communities; and opening up public services – all reflect the kinds of ambitions of many of the funded projects.



In their White Paper, Natural Choice, the Coalition Government describes a need to “rethink our relationship with nature and the way we value the benefits we get from it” (p.7) ¹. Reconnecting people and nature is a national priority not only because it will safeguard and enrich our natural green resources, but also because of the significant health and wellbeing benefits associated with spending more time outdoors². Whilst there is evidence to show that a large proportion of the population enjoys spending time in the natural environment, the frequency of contact with green spaces varies considerably, with levels of participation being particularly low for older age groups, the black and minority ethnic (BAME) populations and members of DE socio-economic groups³.

This vision of changing the way people relate to the natural environment reflects the core ethos of Access to Nature. As well as recognising the value of giving people more opportunities to access the outdoors, Access to Nature is seeking to achieve “an increase in communities’ sense of ownership of local natural places”⁴. All projects funded through the programme have sought to build a sense of ownership amongst people that would typically have little or no contact with the natural environment. Many projects are working with people who live in areas of multiple deprivation. Where the majority of housing is high rise flats with no garden access many residents are unaware of the green spaces they can access and enjoy on their doorstep. Some have responsibilities or disabilities that make it difficult to get outside, and some of the children in these areas go to school where there are concrete yards instead of playing fields. Changing the way people living in these areas relate to the natural environment has been challenging, but there is a volume of evidence from Access to Nature to show that it is possible, and a hugely enriching experience for everyone involved.

In this paper we share some of this evidence, drawing on the experiences of 16 projects based in diverse urban and rural communities across England. We consider what it means to ‘build a sense of ownership’ and highlight the many ways in which they have brought people closer to their natural environment.





BUILDING A SENSE OF OWNERSHIP OF THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT - WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?

A sense of ownership means different things to different people. It hinges on the way people think, feel and behave and it is evident in what they say and do as they become more accustomed to spending time outdoors.

Reviewing the experiences of the Access to Nature projects, we have found that there are three aspects of 'ownership' that the projects consistently describe.

1

'OWNERSHIP'

is about being confident to access and enjoy the natural environment

Access to Nature projects have seen a change in the way people feel about their ability to get involved in the outdoors. Many people, in their initial contact with Access to Nature projects, lack confidence to spend time outdoors because they are unaware of where to go or what to do or because they are fearful of visiting some places or simply can't see the benefits of being outdoors. This has changed as people have become more familiar with different green spaces and as they have had first hand experience of the things that they can do outside. The projects have observed this growth in people's confidence in different ways:

- They are revisiting sites independently with their friends and family
- They are exploring new natural places independently
- They are taking public transport to visit places that are further afield
- They are not phased by bad weather and have learnt to dress appropriately for spending time outdoors
- They are more relaxed and at ease being outdoors
- They are more comfortable undertaking conservation activities and 'getting their hands dirty'.



Two stories from the **Walk on the Wildside (WOW)**, led *Castle Cavendish Foundation*, illustrate what a change in confidence can mean in practice for the community groups and children that the project has worked with.

Revisiting sites and exploring new places independently

Towards the end of year three of the project, the Project Officer went to meet up with a community group to make some plans for a trip. When she got there she discovered that the group members had taken themselves off to Colwick Woods for the day, a place that none of them had been to before. During another trip to Clumber Park, the group leader noted how much the group members had changed:

"All of them, they would never have dreamt of coming to a place like this. They wouldn't even have known it on a map....If I hadn't organised today, one of the others would have. Before, they would never have done."

Overcoming fears of the natural world

When they first attended the Forest School a great many children were initially scared of insects, spiders and dogs. The weekly activities created a space where many fears could be steadily overcome, resulting in children who were more confident and much more self assured in the woods. The Project Officer described the changes she observed:

"Two girls from one group were very unhappy about the mud at the start however towards the end of one session they threw themselves in, rolling down hill several times. They were totally covered in mud and very pleased with themselves."



2

'OWNERSHIP' is about caring for the natural environment

Access to Nature projects have seen a change in people's attitudes to looking after the natural environment. Whereas previously people may have 'written off' certain parks or woodlands or other green spaces because they considered them to be unsafe or unpleasant environments, they are now speaking out about anti-social behaviour or choosing to get involved in activities that improve and enhance sites. A more caring attitude to the natural environment has been evident in the following ways:

- People are refraining from behaviour that is potentially damaging to the natural environment, for example they are no longer littering
- People are engaging in activities that help to conserve or enhance the natural environment
- People are regularly giving time as volunteers to contribute to green space improvements
- People are starting groups or joining groups that take responsibility for the management of sites.

The following accounts from two Nottinghamshire based projects illustrate how attitudes of some young people towards the environment have changed.

Young people caring for their natural environment

Wildlife in the City, led by *Nottinghamshire Wildlife Trust*, worked with one youth group that initially had a fairly negative view about the Country Park. A year later, the attitudes of the young people towards the Country Park have changed and they now look down on anyone that causes disruption and damages trees. As trust has been building with local groups, people are starting to share information about problems on their local sites. This is proving to be a good source of information to help tackle on-going problems.

When the **Environmental Education and Access Programme**, led by *Nottinghamshire YMCA* surveyed young people at the end of their course they found that 98% reported that they 'definitely' now care more for the natural environment. This figure doesn't, however, say it all. Far more revealing has been the way in which young people have demonstrated a caring attitude by engaging enthusiastically in the various course activities. This was well described by the Project Officer:

"To see young people, who would normally attempt to impress their peers by deliberately demonstrating a brash and careless approach to all situations, delicately transferring their pond dipping catch from a net to a magnifying pot with the utmost care and sensitivity, speaks volumes in itself."



3

'OWNERSHIP'

is about incorporating the natural environment into everyday experiences

Some people have been so enthused by their new experiences of natural places that they want to ensure that the outdoors becomes a regular feature of their lives. For some children this has entailed convincing family members to visit new places with them; for some adults it has been about changing the way they do things so that they spend more time outdoors in nature. Where Access to Nature projects have worked closely with community groups, schools and other organisations, they have encountered a willingness to explore how the natural environment can be embedded in their day to day work.

People have incorporated the natural environment into every day experiences in the following ways:

- Teaching staff are planning their curriculum differently to encourage more interaction with the natural environment
- Children are indicating that they want to walk or cycle to school more rather than take the car
- Organisations are routinely planning wildlife activities for their members and clients
- Young people are keen to spend more time doing outdoors activities.

This account from the **WOW** project describes the changes that one group have made.

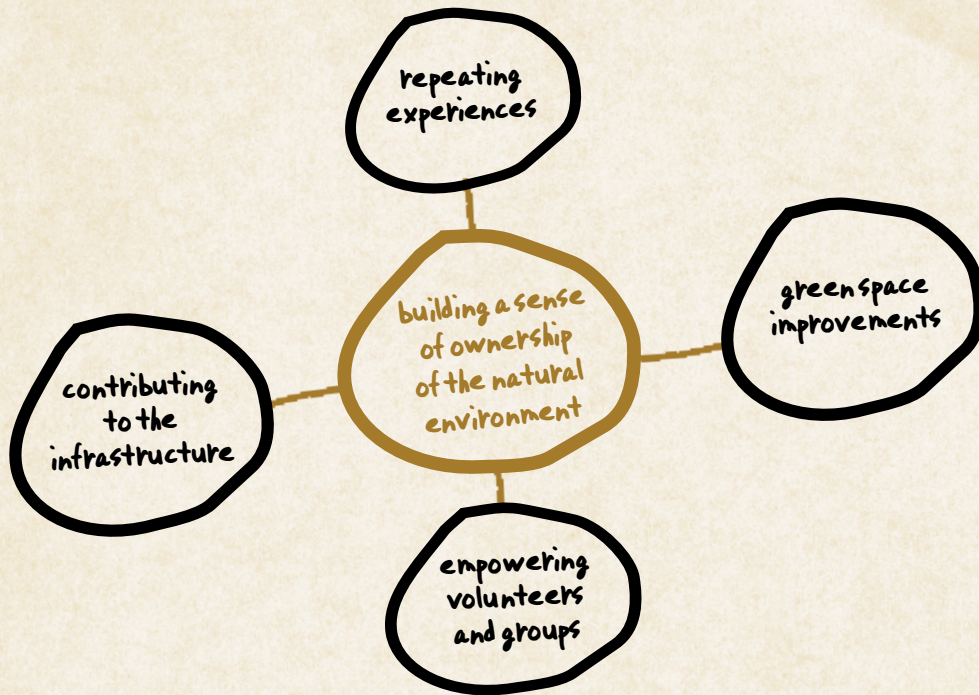
Making the outdoors part of the everyday

After trips with the WOW projects, children from the Action for Young Carers project have been going home and asking to go out more. However, many are unable to do this with their families, so Action for Young Carers is now intending to change its activities, as their group leader explained:

"The children are now asking to do different things. Before we might have gone on a picnic and that's it. But this project has given us ideas of others things to do, like making kites and bird watching. It's reinforced the need to do things outdoors."



BUILDING A SENSE OF OWNERSHIP OF THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT - what works?



We've learnt from Access to Nature that there are many ways to build a sense of ownership of the natural environment and the most effective projects have been those that have adapted their approach to suit the people that they are working with. In this part of the paper we describe some of the strategies and approaches that have been applied.



Repeat exposure and relationship building

“The very action of taking young people out into the countryside to take part in activities that they so obviously enjoy gives the sites visited a tangible, real value as far as the participants are concerned, and value encourages caring.”

Environmental Education and Access Programme, Nottinghamshire YMCA

“Turning people from one-off beneficiaries of an activity into regular volunteers is generally a lengthy and, at times, difficult process. It involves, amongst other things, establishing a relationship and rapport with individuals, developing trust and nurturing their interest without making demands. This needs an investment of staff time and must be consistent and ongoing to be successful; sporadic contacts or a series of one-offs is not enough to establish a relationship.”

Habitat, CSV

Access to Nature projects are demonstrating consistently that a sense of ownership of the natural environment does not emerge overnight. One-off visits and events serve to whet people's appetite and introduce them to the many benefits associated with spending time outdoors, but they do not fundamentally change the way people relate to their natural environment. Instead, projects have found that repeated exposure to nature has been key to overcoming psychological and cultural barriers. There are certain **features** of this approach that are important:

- Creating regular opportunities for people to engage with green spaces on their doorstep
- Keeping the activities simple so that they can be replicated independently
- Putting enjoyment first, particularly when engaging young people
- Developing activities for children *and* their parents so that the whole family develops a new relationship with the natural environment.
- Developing activities that are responsive to people's ideas so that they start to feel they have a stake in what is happening
- Involving the same staff in activities so that they establish a long term relationship with people.



Getting people involved in the improvement of green spaces

“The feedback from the Hastings Trust volunteers was the more they work in the ghyll, the more they connect with the place. For many, the ghyll has become a favourite place with a strong sense of ownership.”

Access to Nature in Sussex, Sussex Wildlife Trust

Attitudes to green spaces can be tainted by perceptions that sites are unsafe or poorly maintained. People don't feel confident visiting places because of their negative feelings towards them; because they don't spend time on the sites they don't value them and therefore don't want to spend time contributing to their care and maintenance. This creates a vicious cycle whereby sites can fall further into disrepair. Through Access to Nature there have been many attempts to break this cycle by creating opportunities for people to make small-scale easily identifiable improvements to green spaces. **Features** of this approach that have been important are:

- Focusing efforts on *local* improvements that are visible to others
- Ensuring people can see the evidence of their efforts
- Working with a group of people over a period of time so that they develop a shared sense of group identity and endeavour
- Creating opportunities to showcase and celebrate improvements to engender a sense of pride.



Telford Access to Nature, led by the Severn Gorge Countryside Trust, has worked with large numbers of volunteers to improve the look and feel of local woodlands, orchards and parks. They have observed significant changes in the willingness of residents and groups to access the sites as a result of the improvements:

“Randlay Valley and Hollinswood was not used by local people because it was seen as unsafe and it had not been well managed. New interpretation boards and path improvements have made walks in the area much more enjoyable and local people now use it.”

Wyke Beck Valley Pride, led by *Leeds City Council Regenerations Team*, are challenging pervasive negative attitudes to local green spaces by getting some visible improvements done quickly and highlighting the bigger picture of achievements across the valley. They have come to recognise the importance of regular press and media contact to keep people informed of the changes that are underway.



The Young Carers Nature Challenge, led by *The Conservation Volunteers*, have observed young carers taking great pride in the nature trails, interpretations boards and maps they have created. In the first year, a Youth Officer led a project with young carers where they built a bridge, a flight of woodland steps, and undertook a range of practical conservation activities to improve biodiversity.

Commenting on the impact on the young people, he said:

“On the final celebration day, a young carer who had participated since the start of the project, took great pride in showing people around the site. That felt like ownership.”

Working with volunteers and groups in an empowering way

“To help demonstrate to the volunteers that they could lead tasks, it was decided that gradually volunteers would take more responsibility for the running of task days, which over time would make them feel that the role of taking leadership wasn’t as intimidating as they first thought.”

Sowe Valley Project, Warwickshire Wildlife Trust

“Converting initial interest into a long-term commitment such as being part of a Friends Group has been difficult. Those living next to the sites have been interested in finding out what was happening on their doorstep, but in some cases, once satisfied that we weren’t planning anything that would negatively affect them, they have been harder to engage.”

Local Nature Reserves Project,
North Warwickshire Borough Council

In the main, it has been Project Officers who have instigated the many new and repeat experiences that people have been exposed to. Their presence has been very important in the short term, as they have provided the much-needed encouragement and incentives that people need to get involved. There is a danger, however, that in the long term the continuous input of a Project Officer can get in the way of people taking responsibility for planning and delivering activities on their own. Recognising this, some Access to Nature projects have sought to work with groups in an empowering way. This has happened in different ways:

- Many projects have chosen to work at a group level, building the skills and confidence of people that already share common interests or a common identity
- Offering volunteers a broad range of experiences so that they can develop skills in different areas
- Encouraging people to take more of a lead in instigating green space activities and visits
- Transforming a group of volunteers to a 'Friends Of' group.

Walk on the Wildside, led by *Castle Cavendish Foundation*, has designed a transitional approach to working with groups. Rather than providing trips and trusting that this would generate independent activity, the Project Officer tailored her approach to become a developmental journey for each group. Identifying their specific barriers, she designed the location and type of trip to address these barriers, for example by identifying places with good public transport access if this was important to them. As part of this process, overall responsibility for planning and delivering activities was eventually handed over to groups. The Project Officer has reflected on the resource implications of this approach:

"The process took a considerable period of time and required a strong relationship to provide a foundation of trust. The amount of time and effort required to produce this transition should not be under-estimated."



The Sowe Valley Project, led by *Warwickshire Wildlife Trust* worked closely with volunteers over three years, building their confidence and skills to establish their own Friends of Sowe Valley group. They have written their own paper to share what they have learnt from the experience and in it they highlight the importance of allowing the group to evolve over time at a pace that suits the people involved:

“Three years is a relatively short time to generate a Friends of Group. It is well documented that such groups take time, energy and a common purpose to form and function well. Often such groups are born out of a threat to a community asset or an issue that people want to tackle. In this instance there was no ‘fight’ and no immediate interest group which meant it needed a significant amount of time and energy to develop a group.”

Contributing to an infrastructure that is helping to change the way people relate to the natural environment

“Schools love the opportunity to use our nature reserves but teachers don’t have the confidence to take children out themselves. In order to ensure that this approach is sustained, we need to give these teachers the training and confidence to deliver outdoors activities without being accompanied by a member of the Wildlife Trust staff.”

The Great Outdoors, The Wildlife Trust for Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire and Northamptonshire

“As a group we had no links or contacts to other similar groups in our area and the Wildlife Trust has enabled us to make those contacts. This alone has strengthened our Fishing club immensely.”

Club member, Black Country Living Landscape, The Wildlife Trust for Birmingham and the Black Country

“The bug hunting kits, magnifying glasses, tarpaulins and hand gel have been particularly well used. Booklets have been designed and distributed widely and groups have reportedly used them to run their own activities.”

Walk on the Wildside, Castle Cavendish Foundation



Access to Nature has shown that by working together, groups and organisations are better equipped to provide the information, expertise, encouragement and support that people need to enjoy and care for the natural environment. Partnerships and collaborations have been important because they have:

- Built the capacity of community groups to do more activities independently in the natural environment
- Built the skills of community leaders to engage others in the natural environment
- Introduced teachers to new ways of bringing the outdoors into the classroom⁵
- Contributed to the creation of websites, signage, leaflets, maps, 'explorer kits' and other resources that help people to access and enjoy green spaces
- Strengthened networks between organisations so that efforts to increase access to green spaces are better co-ordinated and mutually reinforcing.

This work has been challenging at times and, like many of the activities described in this paper, it has been resource intensive. Some projects have found that they underestimated how much time was required to build the skills of others, whilst others have commented on difficulties associated with bringing organisations together to create practical and cohesive collaboration on the ground. However, many projects have demonstrated the benefits that accrue when groups and organisations are working together to change how people relate to the natural environment.

People and the Dales, led by the *Yorkshire Dales Millennium Trust*, has been working closely with community groups based in Bradford, Leeds and North East Lancashire to build their capacity to incorporate the outdoors into the every day experience of their members. They have offered training to enable community group leaders to develop their map reading skills and learn about leading walking activities. They have told the story of one community group leader who, since attending the training, has taken his group on a number of walks in the Dales. In addition, his group members now participate in regular programme of walks in their local area. They use public transport to visit places like local parks and the canal and the impetus for this comes very much from the members themselves.



IN SUMMARY

Access to Nature has demonstrated that it is possible to change people's relationship to their natural environment.

People that were previously disconnected with the outdoors are now more confident about accessing and enjoying green spaces. They are visiting sites independently, introducing new green space experiences to their friends and family and displaying a much more relaxed and open attitude to the natural world.

People are also taking care of green spaces on their doorstep. They are learning how to conserve or enhance the natural environment and they are using their skills to bring habitat enhancements to woodlands, parks, community gardens and other sites all around the country.

The outdoors has become a regular feature of many people's lives. Some schools are now embracing the idea of the outdoor classroom and many community groups are using outdoor activities to introduce their members to healthy and positive lifestyles.

These changes haven't happened overnight. They are the product of the concerted efforts of Access to Nature projects that recognised the need to ensure that people have regular, repeat and quality opportunities to engage with, enjoy and enhance their natural environment. Organisations have come together to share skills, knowledge and resources so that they are better equipped to transform people's relationships with the outdoors.

This has been challenging work at times and many projects have discovered that it takes significant time and resources to build trusting and empowering relationships in communities. As the projects have approached their final stages of delivery, many have accessed additional funding from Big Lottery's Changing Spaces Programme to help to sustain the changes that they have made. With an additional injection of resources from Supporting Change and Impact, they are undertaking activities that will further develop the skills of volunteers, consolidate local networks and partnerships and strengthen local groups.

The legacy of learning that is emerging from the experience Access to Nature projects is considerable. That we now have a much better understanding of how to build a stronger sense of ownership with the natural environment is testament to the commitment of projects to ensure that people re-examine their relationship with nature and value the benefits it brings.



PROJECT FACT FILE

Project Fact File

Name Access to Nature in Sussex

Lead Sussex Wildlife Trust

Overview Aims to re-engage local people from hard to reach communities with the natural world by providing them with positive experiences of nature, whilst also contributing to improvements for biodiversity in urban sites.

Website www.sussexwildlifetrust.org.uk



Project Fact File

Name Black Country Living Landscape

Lead The Wildlife Trust for Birmingham and the Black Country

Overview Aims to transform accessible green spaces and local nature reserves in partnerships with people and communities across the whole of the Black Country.

Website www.bbcwildlife.org.uk

Project Fact File

Name Environmental Education and Action Programme

Lead Nottinghamshire YMCA

Overview Provides greater opportunities for experiential outdoor and environmental education for young people aged 11-25 and families, experiencing socio-economic and environmental deprivation throughout Nottinghamshire.

Website www.nottsymca.org

Project Fact File

Name Habitat

Lead CSV

Overview Offers a range of activities across a number of sites in Ipswich to engage people in the natural environment

Website www.csv.org.uk

Project Fact File

Name Local Nature Reserves Project

Lead North Warwickshire Borough Council

Overview Aims to involve the community in activities that improve the biodiversity and wildlife habitats of four green space sites in North Warwickshire whilst also creating more opportunities for the sites to be used for learning and recreation.

Website www.northwarwicks.gov.uk

Project Fact File

Name People and the Dales

Lead Yorkshire Dales Millennium Trust

Overview Aims to engage with disadvantaged groups who have little or no experience of the countryside and enable them to take part in fun, active, thought provoking activities in the Southern Yorkshire Dales.

Website www.ydmt.org

Project Fact File

Name Sowe Valley Project

Lead Warwickshire Wildlife Trust

Overview Aims to reconnect, both physically and mentally, the local community with the Sowe River Valley and improve the valley's biodiversity and habitats for the benefits of people and wildlife.

Website www.warwickshirewildlifetrust.org.uk/sowe-valley-project



Project Fact File

Name Telford Access to Nature

Lead Severn Gorge countryside Trust

Overview Aims to develop awareness of the natural environment amongst people living in Telford, particularly those with physical, sensory and learning disabilities, and improve physical access to sites.

Website www.severngorge.org.uk

Project Fact File

Name The Great Outdoors Project

Lead The Wildlife Trust for Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire and Northamptonshire

Overview Aims to encourage new audiences from local communities and under-represented groups to enjoy their green spaces and value wildlife by becoming more active and involved with their nearby nature reserves.

Website www.wildlifebcn.org

Project Fact File

Name Walk on the Wildside

Lead castle cavendish Foundation

Overview Aims to work with schools and community groups to forge stronger relationships with the natural environment in highly deprived areas in the heart of Nottingham.

Website www.castlecavendish.org.uk



Project Fact File

Name Wildlife in the city
Lead Nottinghamshire Wildlife Trust
Overview Aims to inspire and support a great number of people living in economically deprived areas of Nottingham to access, enjoy and contribute to the maintenance of green spaces.
Website www.nottinghamshirewildlife.org

Project Fact File

Name Wyke Beck Valley Pride
Lead Leeds city council Regeneration Programmes Team
Overview Aims to provide practical improvements to the Wyke Beck Valley in Leeds, offer environmental education, encourage community volunteering and participation in the life of the valley.
Website www.wykebeckvalleypride.org.uk/

Project Fact File

Name Young carers Nature Challenge
Lead The conservation Volunteers
Overview Provides young carers respite from their caring responsibilities, whilst also giving them opportunities to discover and explore the natural world through a range of nature-based games and practical conversation activities.
Website www.tcv.org.uk



ABOUT ACCESS TO NATURE

Access to Nature is a scheme run by Natural England and funded by the Big Lottery Fund. Natural England works on behalf of a consortium of eleven other major environmental organisations and distributes £28.75 million Lottery funding under the scheme, which has been developed to encourage more people to enjoy the outdoors, particularly those with little or no previous contact with the natural environment. Funded projects range from local community based schemes through to national initiatives from large organisations. Diversity in scale is mirrored by a diversity and richness of projects, from equipment to allow people with disabilities to access the natural environment; supporting disadvantaged groups and those who ordinarily face barriers to visiting the countryside; as well as many projects which are providing a range of volunteering and educational opportunities for local communities and young people.



FOOTNOTES

- 1 Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA), 2011. *White Paper on The Natural Choice: Securing the Value of Nature*. London: DEFRA
- 2 Natural England, 2012. *Health and Natural Environments* (online). Available at http://www.naturalengland.org.uk/Images/health-information-pack_tcm6-31487.pdf (accessed 21st May, 2013)
- 3 Natural England, 2010. *Monitor of Engagement with the Natural Environment* (MENE) (online). Available at <http://www.naturalengland.org.uk/ourwork/research/mene.aspx2010> (accessed 21st May, 2013)
- 4 Access to Nature has five main outcomes. Each project has to meet Outcome 5 which is 'An increase in communities sense of ownership of natural places' and at least one other outcome.
- 5 See another Access to Nature Learning Paper in this series entitled '*Learning together: schools and the natural environment sector*' which is focused on the subject of working with schools.

ALTERNATIVE FORMATS

Our documents are available as pdf downloads from our website, suitable for text reader technology. We may be able to provide other formats (e.g. Braille, a minority language, or large print) for specific documents where there is a proven communication need.

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