



THE OWL COLLABORATION

Summary Impact Report 2024



A Collective Vision

The Ernest Cook Trust's OWL Collaboration, launched in 2021, champions Outdoor Learning to help children and young people flourish.

It tackles the twin challenges of nature deprivation and the mental health and climate crises by funding **immersive residential weeks in nature** at a range of specialist Outdoor Learning Centres for schools with the greatest needs.

Together, we envision an education system where Outdoor Learning is mainstream, fostering connection to nature, wellbeing, and learning engagement.

Holistic Approach

We believe in transformational change, so as well as funding immersive weeks in nature, we partner up and provide grants and support to help schools embed and sustain Outdoor Learning back in their own settings.

We know that the biggest impact comes from working together, so as well as providing individual funding to Outdoor Learning providers, **we invest in building a community of practice and collective voice** through whole Network meetings, learning days, joint training and shared resources.

We also embrace collaborative evaluation, employing a multi-modal approach to evaluate pupil, school and network outcomes with a commitment to a meaningful, iterative approach.

The OWL Collaboration Theory of Change (Summary)



This short report captures our most recent, compelling findings. We hope you enjoy the read! [Click here to see our full Year 3 Impact Report](#)

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A week out of the ordinary...

An Outdoor Week of Learning (OWL) is a tailored residential experience taking 8-18 year-olds away from their ordinary lives at home and school and into a week of immersive, outdoor encounter.

Each **Outdoor Learning Centre (OLC)** bringing its own expertise, offering a combination of **nature immersion, curriculum links and therapeutic approaches.**

OWL participants are encouraged to **actively engage with nature rather than just spend time in it**-noticing, appreciating, sensing, feeling, and finding meaning. From **animal husbandry** and **field to fork journeys** to **exploring habitats** and **hiking hills** - every moment fosters **connection, curiosity, and care.**



It was definitely a healthier week because I wasn't destroying my eyes with the screens. Instead of screens, I spent time with the people here.

KS4 OWL pupil



Before, during and after an OWL, we measure change using pupil and teacher surveys, pupil postcards, reflective activities and teacher observations. In particular, we look for shifts in nature connectedness, care and concern for the environment, wellbeing and engagement in learning.



Limited access to technology



The outdoors in all elements

EAT
SHEEP
REPEAT

Routines and responsibilities



A focus on social connection



Opportunities for regular reflection



Within a day, you could see the mindsets start to change and they could see the benefits of working together

Teacher, OWL Primary School

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...can ignite the extraordinary!



In all my years of teaching, this has been the best residential experience for our children.

It's just phenomenal the impact this week has had.

Headteacher, OWL Primary School

[Click here to watch our Core Story 1 reel:](#)

[A Journey Towards Nature Connection](#)

[Click here to watch our Core Story 2 reel:](#)

[A Pathway to Personal Growth](#)



Connection

After sustained, active engagement in green spaces, pupils feel more connected to nature and to each other and experience a deep sense of peace, belonging and joy.

Purpose

A move away from activities providing instant gratification to those that nurture responsibility creates a sense of purpose, helping pupils feel consequential and able to reflect on their place in the natural world.

Grit & Growth

When pupils and teachers are challenged together in new, outdoor settings, classroom dynamics shift, learning mindsets flex and everybody has space to grow.

Our year in numbers (2023/24)

Reach

Funding targets underrepresented groups, promoting equitable access to nature.

69% of schools were from the top 30% most deprived areas of England¹ and Wales²



1,233

OWL PARTICIPANTS
AGED 8-18



62

SCHOOLS



54%

ELIBABLE
FOR FREE
SCHOOL MEALS
(n=1052)



46%

FROM
MINORITISED
ETHNIC GROUPS
(n=840)



32%

WITH SPECIAL
EDUCATIONAL
NEEDS
(n=1052)

Residential in a Box pilot:

15 primary schools piloted familiarisation resources to prepare pupils and families for residentials and to help teachers maximise learning from the week.

Council for Learning Outside the Classroom (CLOtC) membership:

31 schools received annual membership for access to Outdoor Learning resources and CPD opportunities.

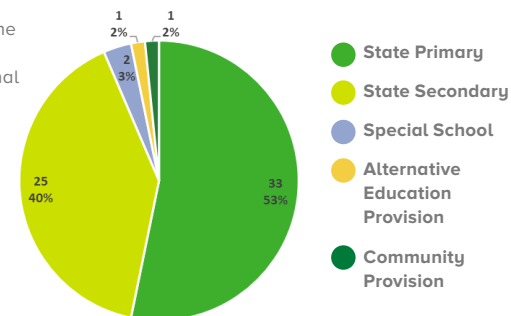
Grants

The 2023/2024 programme provided **Transport Grants** of:

Teacher Training Grants of:



Programme reach by educational provision



- 1 Index of Multiple Deprivation (England), 2019. <https://imd-by-postcode.opendatacommunities.org/imd/2019>
- 2 Welsh Indices of Multiple Deprivation, 2019. <https://www.data.cymru/wimd>

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Key Findings

Nature Connection

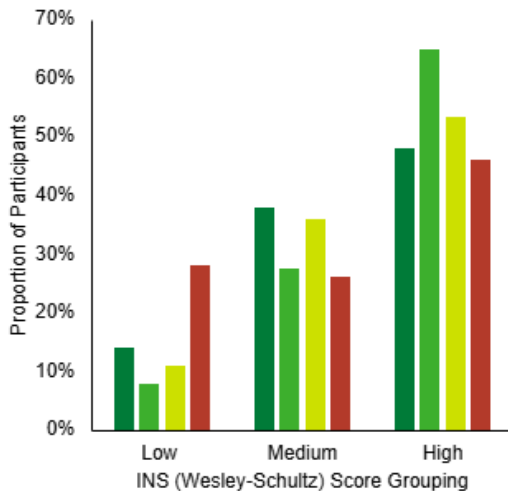
Sustained growth in nature connectedness:

- » Pupils report a **sustained statistically significant increase in nature connectedness** following an OWL (Inclusion of Nature in Self (INS) scale n=586, p<0.0001)
- » **Key Stage (KS) 3** (ages 11-14) reported the largest gains sustained at **16%** six weeks post-visit.
- » Pupils frequently associated time spent outdoors with feelings of **joy and peace**, contrasting sharply with indoor time at home.

Teacher observations - strong behaviour shifts:

Post-programme surveys revealed:

- ✓ **41% increase** in pupils **initiating conversations about nature**.
- ✓ **86% of teachers** reporting pupils expressed **a greater desire to spend time outdoors**



- Pre Visit
- Post Visit
- 6 Weeks Post Visit
- National Benchmark

Proportion of OWL pupil scores classified as having low (1-3) medium (4) and high (5-7) nature connectedness, compared to the national benchmark (Inclusion of Nature in Self Scale-INS)



I feel like before I was more shut in, I wanted to stay inside...I didn't value nature as much as I did this week, so I feel like I've been more connected to it.

KS3 OWL pupil



Care and concern for the environment



Key Findings

- » **All pupils** demonstrated a statistically significant **increase in care and concern for the environment** following an OWL (n=584, p=0.04).
- » **Teacher surveys** highlighted that OWLs encourage **positive intentional behaviours towards the environment**, with **78% of teachers** reporting most or all pupils displayed such behaviours six weeks post-OWL, a **59% increase** from baseline scores.
- » **KS3 pupils** (ages 11–14) started with the lowest baseline scores but achieved the **largest gains**. This aligns with wider research on the **teenage 'dip' in nature connectedness**³ reinforcing the **importance and potential** to re-engage this age group with nature.

Qualitative insights

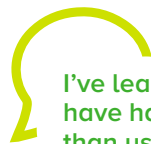
Behavioural shifts and intentionality

Teachers observed that activities such as **field-to-fork experiences, animal husbandry, and habitat building** enabled pupils to **form meaningful connections** and **develop a sense of responsibility for nature**.

Pupils reflected on themes of **nature appreciation, food provenance, and reducing pollution**, aligning with the Meaning and Compassion pathways of the [5 Pathways to Nature Connection](#).

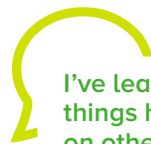
Peer influence and social barriers

Despite progress, **normalising conversations about nature** remains a challenge, especially among older pupils where environmental behaviours may be perceived as **'uncool'**.



I've learnt that animals have harder lives than us.

KS2 OWL pupil



I've learnt that small things have a big effect on others.

KS3 OWL pupil



This week has really helped widen horizons.

Teacher, OWL Secondary School

Sustained engagement with nature through OWLs fosters meaningful connections, positive behaviours, and a lasting sense of responsibility for the environment.

³ [Nature Connectedness: Pro-nature behaviours and the 'Teenage Dip' – Results from a population survey | Finding Nature](#)

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Wellbeing

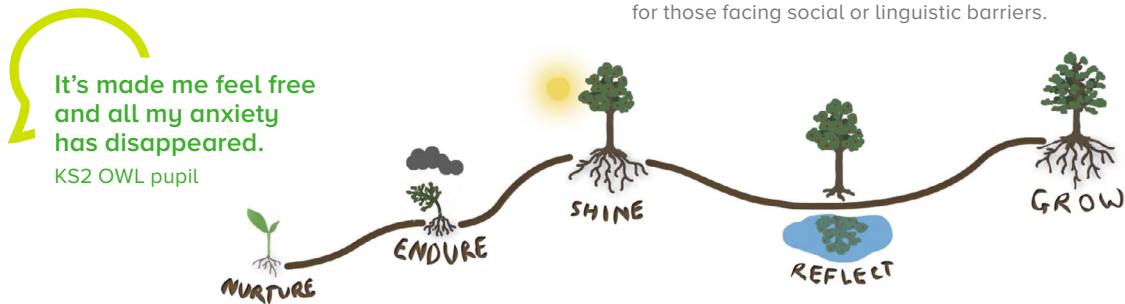
[Click here to watch our Core Story 2 reel:
A Pathway Towards Personal Growth](#)



Key Findings

- » OWL interventions result in a **statistically significant improvement in pupils' self-reported wellbeing**.
- » **KS3 pupils** experienced the **largest wellbeing gains** (11.8%), which were maintained six weeks later, highlighting the intervention's significant potential for adolescents facing social and emotional challenges.

- » **Positive correlations** emerged between **nature connectedness and improved wellbeing** (Pearson's Co-efficient), in line with a growing body of evidence linking environmental engagement and better mental health.
- » **Resilience** emerged as a key outcome across all OWL experiences. Pupils with English as an Additional Language (EAL) demonstrated the most sustained gains, highlighting additional potential for those facing social or linguistic barriers.



Hedonic & Eudaimonic Wellbeing

Teacher and pupil reflections indicate that key mechanisms driving change included time away from screens, teamwork, and task ownership, promoting both hedonic wellbeing (pleasure) and eudaimonic wellbeing (purpose and personal growth).

"They're not here to be entertained; the children have responsibilities...that is a lesson they don't get anywhere else." Teacher, OWL Primary School

OWL interventions promote improvements in wellbeing, resilience, and social connection, providing pupils with tools to navigate challenges and develop a sense of purpose.

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Engagement in learning

Key Findings

- » Although self-reported data revealed no significant changes, **teacher-reported data showed a 38% increase in pupils engaged in learning six weeks post-OWL.**

Qualitative insights – grit and growth mindset

- » Pupil and teacher feedback suggests that an OWL intervention promotes a **shift in learning mindset**, with themes of challenge, perseverance, and self-reflection frequently cited as underpinning these changes.
- » Pupils reported **increased** resilience and **confidence in learning**, which teachers corroborated through observations of pupils independently taking on challenges and showing a willingness to “try again” after setbacks.
- » At six weeks post-OWL, some teachers observed **sustained improvements in classroom behaviours** such as independence and cooperation. However, outcomes varied across groups, potentially influenced by individual traits, classroom dynamics, or the level of follow-up support provided after the OWL experience.



The children have a better sense of themselves and what they can do, some have come back more resilient, others will try things they wouldn't have tried before.

Teacher, OWL Primary School



Changing my mindset from I can't do this to, like, I just did that...

KS3 OWL pupil



OWL interventions support engagement in learning by fostering a growth mindset and collaborative skills with sustained impacts observed in some pupils through increased independence and cooperation.

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School Outcomes

Outdoor Learning Culture in Schools



A Garden Classroom in Hackney

Following their OWLs at Ufton Court, a cluster of 4 OWL schools in Hackney secured a teacher training grant to fund a Sustainability Conference and four twilight workshops for 60 teachers, delivered by The Garden Classroom.

Using small green spaces on site and nearby, the workshops showed teachers how to create meaningful Outdoor Learning experiences right on their doorstep. Since then, an estimated 1,770 children—from Reception to Year 6—have benefited from outdoor learning sessions inspired by the training.



An OWL-inspired Book for Barry

60 children and 8 teachers from the Pencoedre Learning cluster in Barry, Wales worked with a local author to create and produce 'Muck & Magic.' The story is inspired by their OWL with Farms for City Children and has helped them to reflect on and apply all their learning to their lives back at school as one teacher explained:

“As a result of sharing the book with more than 1,500 children across our schools, it has ignited a curiosity and love for Outdoor Learning. The pupils are currently working on developing their own garden to grow their own food and cook for their families and community.”



OWL Mentors & An Eco Team in Bristol

An OWL has become a popular part of the school calendar at City Academy, Bristol and in their 3rd year, the school decided to give some pupils the chance to develop their leadership skills and return to Shallowford Farm for the second time, as OWL mentors.

In addition, the school were supported with a grant to grow their School Eco Team who have created a wildlife pond, a hedgehog garden and are involved in tending the school's community allotment.

6 weeks after an OWL...

Teacher Confidence

Teacher surveys told us that participation in an OWL can **significantly impact** both **teacher belief** and **confidence in Outdoor Learning**.

96% of teachers feel that spending time in nature is important to them

(↑34%)

92% of teachers believe that Outdoor Learning is beneficial to both teachers and pupils

(↑39%)

90% of teachers feel confident about taking their teaching outside the classroom

(↑27%)

This year, significant progress has also been made in supporting schools with grants to increase Outdoor Learning in school.

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Network Outcomes

OWL partners testify to the programme's success in building **a shared community of practice** which has also helped some extend their provision to local schools and others to strengthen their evaluation processes.

Many partners feel that the programme has helped to **amplify the collective voice of the sector**. Moving forward, influencing wider education policy is a key priority for this element of the programme.



OWL has helped us shape and strengthen our programme delivery through its provision and proactive, inclusive approach.

OLC Partner

OWL Network Outcomes, Partner Survey Responses

90%
of partners agreed or strongly agreed we are building a stronger community of practice

100%
of partners agreed or strongly agreed we are helping to raise the profile of the sector

90%
of partners agreed or strongly agreed that we are building a stronger evidence base with which to influence policy.



It feels like a well-oiled team of collaborators.

OLC Partner



What have we learned?

The OWL Collaboration continues to deliver **meaningful and transformative experiences** for pupils, schools, and the wider Outdoor Learning network.

With evidence of significant impact on **nature connectedness, resilience, and learning mindsets**—particularly for KS3 pupils—the programme is addressing **critical developmental needs while fostering environmental responsibility**. Crucially, as per the aims, the programme has **prioritised equity**, reaching **underserved cohorts** including those with SEND, EAL, high FSM eligibility, and minoritised ethnic backgrounds.

Teacher training and resource development have supported **cultural and pedagogical shifts**, empowering schools to embrace Outdoor Learning. However, embedding these practices sustainably remains a challenge due to **ongoing resource and capacity barriers**.

Beyond individual schools, the programme is helping to strengthen the Outdoor Learning sector

by fostering a **network of practice and improving evaluation processes**, but there is more to do.

These findings highlight OWL's role as a **scalable, impactful model for embedding environmental care and sustainability into education**, laying the groundwork for deeper research, targeted support, and broader influence in the years ahead.

What's Next?

Over the next three years, we will:

- **Expand our legacy offer to schools** to ensure increased embedding of Outdoor Learning in education settings.
- **Deepen our understanding of programme impact** on different demographic cohorts.
- **Refine our evaluation tools** to include more participatory methods.
- **Develop and implement a strategic plan** which amplifies programme voice and influence within the Outdoor Learning sector and beyond.



If I could give it a number out of 10, it would be a 10. It was the best- it was such a break from school-it was such a break from home.

KS3 OWL Pupil



Thank you!

Collecting data over time takes time! We are indebted to the school staff who sought permissions, completed forms and patiently helped pupils to complete our surveys before completing one themselves. We thank all of those who also took the time to observe and reflect and who were willing to be interviewed.

Our enormous thanks to The Dulverton Trust for their ongoing support and commitment to The OWL Collaboration.

THE DULVERTON TRUST

Most importantly, we'd like to thank all the children and young people who participated in an Outdoor Week of Learning and who had the courage to tell us their stories.



Join us

We warmly invite potential co-funding partners to join us in supporting The OWL Collaboration programme. This partnership offers a unique opportunity to provide grant funding that concurrently delivers grassroots impact and strengthens the case for systemic change for the benefit of children and young people.

The Ernest Cook Trust would welcome discussions with any organisation eager to join us on this meaningful journey. Please contact us!



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