

Learning and Engagement in the Open Spaces Department

A review of 2012-13 and recommendations for the future



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Learning and Engagement in the Open Spaces Department

This report was funded by the generous support of the City Bridge Trust

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HIGHLIGHTS FROM 2012-13

143,000

People directly engaged with our activities

90%

Of people gave our events and activities a thumbs up

130,000

People participated in our informal events and activities

13,000

School children attended a formal learning session

22,000

Hours of learning happened in our formal sessions

550

Formal learning activities took place

280

Informal events and activities were organised

17

Local authorities benefited from our work



THE IMPORTANCE OF LEARNING AND ENGAGEMENT IN OPEN SPACES

A recent, ground-breaking study by the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds highlighted that only 1 in 5 young people are connected to nature. Our connection to nature is a mediating factor in our emotional response towards, and future stewardship of, the natural environment. As a result, developing connections to nature is an essential tool in developing conscientious, informed citizens who will tackle the upcoming environmental challenges we face.

A key factor in developing connections to nature is the ability to learn and spend time in a natural or green space. This engagement is not limited to a focus on environmental subjects, studies show that learning a range of associated subjects within an open space such as history and social skills can also increase these benefits. However, less than a quarter of children in the UK spend time in their local green spaces (Natural Childhood, 2008).

This report reviews the range of learning and engagement opportunities provided across the Open Spaces Department to highlight our success, present a coherent terminology for discussing engagement, and recommend ways to strengthen this area of work.

'Children spend more than 20 hours per week online and 17 hours per week watching television.'
(Natural Childhood, 2008)



The mutual benefit of learning and engagement in Open Spaces

While developing a connection to nature helps the environment by creating informed, active citizens, it also benefits the children themselves. For example, in 2005 Richard Louv's paper on 'nature deficit disorder' caught the attention of government and illustrated the importance for children to connect to nature to reduce the occurrence of obesity, attention disorders and depression.

In 2011, two papers 'The Natural Choice: Securing the value of nature' and 'Sowing the seeds: reconnecting London's Children with Nature', were published, highlighting the importance of outdoor learning, play and open spaces to young people's healthy development. All three of these publications demonstrated the importance of open spaces in urban environments to young people's lives, but that increasing numbers of young people are not engaging with their local open spaces.

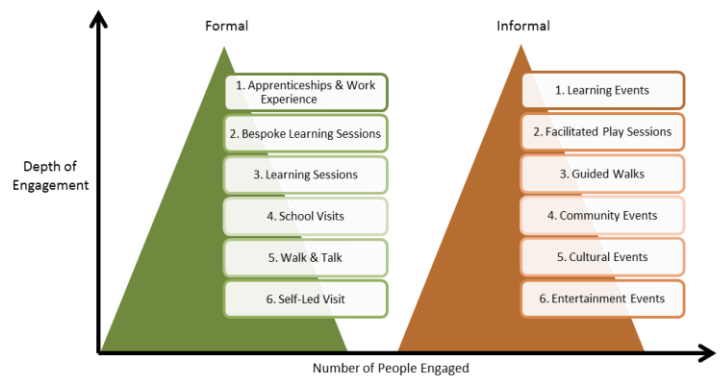




TYPES OF LEARNING AND ENGAGEMENT OPPORTUNITIES

Learning and engagement takes many forms across the Open Spaces Department. However, all our activities can be broadly categorised into formal and informal opportunities. Formal opportunities comprise our work with schools or education institutions whereas informal opportunities consist of our engagement with the general public. However, both types of opportunities share a common goal: they focus on helping others understand the value of our open spaces.

We provide a large range of activities under both formal and informal opportunities which vary in their depth of engagement and target audiences. The framework of opportunities we provide are described in Diagram 1. We have chosen to exclude sport related engagement activities from our analysis.



Learning and Engagement Activities and Depth of Engagement. Both formal and informal learning and engagement opportunities can be broken down into 6 main activity types with varying levels of depth of engagement. This diagram represents increasing depth of engagement as an activity moves up the pyramid. The diagram also highlights that activities with deeper levels of engagement often reach fewer participants and vice-versa. More detailed information on each type of activity can be found in Appendix 1.

Understanding our Audiences

Successful learning and engagement also takes into consideration the audiences it is designed for, in order to maximise potential engagement. The depth of engagement should also be considered in this process. For example, a detailed talk on the science behind lichens would not be appropriate for a group of young families on their first trip to an open space. As a result, we have defined our audiences in two basic ways described below. We recognise that these designations are very general and cannot give adequate insight into the true segmentation of our audiences.

Audience by type

- Families
- School Children (without their parents)
- Adults
- Community groups

Audience by frequency of use

- Regular visitors (3+ times per week)
- Frequent visitors (3+ times per month)
- Irregular visitors (3+ times per year)
- Non-visitors

LOCAL AUTHORITIES OUR WORK BENEFITS

Barnet	Ealing	Islington
Brent	Enfield	Kensington & Chelsea
Buckinghamshire	Essex	Newham
Camden	Hackney	Redbridge
City of London	Hammersmith & Fulham	Waltham Forest
Croydon	Haringey	



OUR ENGAGEMENT IMPACT

The Open Spaces Department currently fulfils an essential role in ensuring that Londoners engage with the natural environment through open spaces. We directly provide learning and engagement activities to over 140,000 people across 17 different local authorities per annum, as well as support partner organisations providing opportunities on our sites.

While we provide opportunities for engagement across our sites, the depth of engagement of our activities differs. Our work with schools illustrates that we are focused on deep engagement while our work with the general public demonstrates that we reach more people through our lighter or 'entry' level engagement activities such as cultural or entertainment events. These events are essential in engaging with our infrequent visitors, and are an excellent step into deeper engagement events.

Our Partners' contributions

Learning and engagement activities are also conducted by a variety of partners at each of the Open Spaces and contribute to our success.

Epping Forest Partners

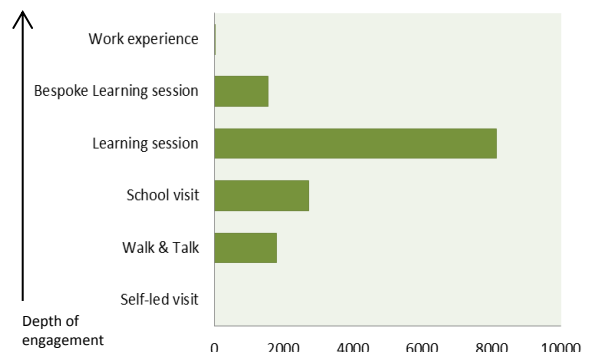
Field Studies Centre – 22,000 people engaged

Epping Forest Centenary Trust – 3358 people engaged

Suntrap – 12,794 people engaged

North London Open Spaces

Royal Society for the Protection of Birds – 750 students engaged



Number of participants in formal learning against depth of engagement. *The diagram illustrates that the majority of our work with schools centres around deep level engagement activities such as learning and bespoke learning sessions.*



Number of participants in informal activities against depth of engagement. *This diagram illustrates that our highest levels of participation in engagement activities centre around our lowest engagement depth activities. These activities are often large scale events and are not run as frequently. Our higher depth engagement activities have a higher frequency but engage with fewer people.*



MANAGING LEARNING & ENGAGEMENT

Learning and engagement is a key strategic priority for the Open Spaces Department and the City of London as represented in the Community Strategy and the Open Spaces Department Business Plan.

Each open space differs in their provision of learning and engagement. Hampstead Heath and Epping Forest both employ dedicated learning teams to manage their formal programmes and elements of their informal programmes. Smaller open spaces such as West Ham Park rely on support services staff or Rangers to provide opportunities.

These differences in staffing levels result in differences in the ability of sites to provide engagement opportunities. Learning and engagement activities are heavily weighted to the larger, higher profile open spaces.

In 2011, an informal learning group was set up across the department to help share resources and best practice. This group functioned on an ad-hoc basis with no strategic influence from senior level managers. Little coordination or alignment of activities, reporting and monitoring occurs within this area of work.

Open Spaces Department Business Plan – Learning & Engagement objectives

- *communicating with and learning from other leading Open Space providers*
- *promoting knowledge and appreciation for the environment and its heritage*
- *providing opportunities for children to learn about the natural environment and heritage through structured work programmes linked to the national curriculum*



C. Totman

What each open space provides:

Burnham Beeches & Stoke Common

Walk & Talks, Work Experience, Learning Events

City Commons

Walk & Talks, Work Experience, Guided Walks, Community Events

Epping Forest

Work Experience, Learning sessions, Bespoke learning sessions, Cultural Events, Entertainment Events, Learning Events, Guided Walks, Community Events

North London Open Spaces

All types of learning and engagement activities are represented. In particular - learning sessions, facilitated play sessions, cultural events.

West Ham Park & City Gardens

School Visits, Work Experience, Cultural Events, Learning Events



FUNDING LEARNING & ENGAGEMENT

Learning and engagement within the Open Spaces is at a critical and exciting point in its development as an area of work. All sites are currently working at capacity in their learning and engagement programmes within the current funding structures. However, there are many new and exciting opportunities for learning and engagement which the Open Spaces department is in an excellent position to capitalise on.

Most of our formal learning and engagement programmes are currently funded by large grant-giving organisations such as the City Bridge Trust and the Heritage Lottery Fund. These funds have allowed us to expand our work on many of our sites. For example, Hampstead Heath grew their formal learning sessions by 33% over the course of the funding and West Ham Park doubled the number school visits they provided. Where sites are not grant funded, formal learning is often provided in a responsive manner with lower levels of engagement. Informal learning and events are also often grant-funded or funded in partnership with other local authorities.

Funding of our activities is a major barrier and opportunity for increasing the quality and quantity of our learning and engagement work. It is essential that the department has a full understanding of our current provision, and looks forward at innovative ways of providing learning and engagement opportunities in order to stay relevant in a fast-moving and potentially lucrative field.

Room for a Strong Voice

The Open Spaces Department is an ideal champion and advocate for learning and engagement in the natural environment in London. However, our profile in the learning and engagement sector is quite low. We have an opportunity to use our reputation as a leading government body to effect the manners in which best practice and standards are set across the sector.

'1 in 3 children cannot identify a magpie'
(Natural Childhood, 2008)

The Funding Landscape

Learning and engagement in the natural environment is becoming an increasingly popular area for grant-giving organisations to fund. Programmes which can demonstrate their innovative nature or their need are regularly funded by a variety of sources including:

- *Trusts and foundations*
- *Large organisations (through CSR budgets)*
- *Big Lottery and Heritage Lottery Fund*
- *Government initiatives*



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

**'1 in 10
children play
in a 'wild'
place.'**
*(Natural
Childhood,
2008)*

The Open Spaces Department provides an essential provision of learning and engagement opportunities for Londoners and other local authorities. Further, our work is exceptionally successful at engaging participants with the value of our sites. However, our work lacks focus and coordination across the department and as a result is not maximising on its potential impact or opportunity for external funding. We make the following recommendations about how to strengthen our work across the department while ensuring that sites maintain their individual requirements.

1. Devise a vision for learning in Open Spaces.

This document will set the framework for strategy planning across the Department and ensure that learning and engagement opportunities are in line with best practice and current standards.

2. Develop a strategy for learning for each Open Space.

This document will allow each site to prioritise activities and opportunities to ensure that audiences and depth of engagement is adequately represented, assisting in the development of the 'menu' of opportunities

3. Agree a standard 'language' for learning, a minimum reporting criteria, and common evaluation techniques in Open Spaces.

Consistent and robust reporting will provide comparable data and assist the Open Spaces in identifying opportunities or gaps in provision more readily.

4. Create and promote an Open Spaces Learning Network.

The Learning Network will reinforce CoL's commitment to learning across all its Open Spaces and enable representatives to share issues around learning delivery and development.

5. Create a funding and promotional strategy for engagement in the Open Spaces.

The majority of learning and engagement opportunities are currently grant funded. Learning and engagement is consistently popular with grant-funding organisations and this strategy would allow the Open Spaces to capitalise on this area of work.

6. Develop opportunities for partnerships across Open Spaces sites and with external organisations.

Working in partnership is a key opportunity for the Open Spaces Department to deliver high quality learning and engagement.

7. Investigate the creation of a central role coordinating our work across Open Spaces.

A strategic coordinating role based in the Directorate would provide support in developing provision across Open Spaces, allowing the department to respond more quickly to opportunities and maintain relevancy.



APPENDIX 1 – A COMMON LANGUAGE

We propose the following common language to be used when planning, reporting and evaluating formal and informal learning activities:

Formal Learning & Engagement

Work Experience and Internship	Bespoke Learning Session	Learning Session	School Visit	Walk & Talk Visit	Self-led Visit
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Planned in advance Focus on skills based learning Clearly defined learning objectives Involve a 1 to 1 learning environment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Planned in advance using a lesson planning technique Clearly defined learning objectives Include a plenary and assessment Led by a learning specialist Joint development of the learning objectives with the teacher and education specialist 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Booked in advance Linked to the national curriculum or other curricula Planned in advance using a lesson planning technique Clearly defined learning objectives Include a plenary and assessment Evaluated by the teachers and/or students Led by a learning specialist 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Booked in advance by an education institution Planned in advance by the staff member Use age appropriate activities and resources Focus on a subject rather than the site itself 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Planned in advance by the staff member Focus on the site and its attributes Do not necessarily use activities or resources such as online teaching support material provided by CoL but could incorporate these 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Not booked in advance Not led by a staff member

Informal Learning & Engagement

Learning Events	Facilitated Play Sessions	Guided Walks	Community Events	Cultural Events	Entertainment Events
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Planned in advance using a lesson planning technique Encompass a range of learning and engagement styles Clearly defined learning objectives Evaluated by the participants Involve site- or subject specific learning objectives 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Planned in advance Encompass a range of learning styles Focus on social learning and skills acquisition Led by a specialist play leader 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Involve site-specific learning objectives Planned in advance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Engage specifically with target communities or groups Involve site-specific learning Aim to promote social cohesion by bringing communities together 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide elements of cultural learning No clear learning objectives Not site-specific 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Have no specific learning objectives Not site-specific