



The Natural Connections Demonstration Project 2012-16

**Funded by DEFRA, Natural England and English Heritage
Managed by Plymouth University**

October 2014

Context

The government White Paper *The Natural Choice* (2011) pledges to ‘**remove barriers to learning outdoors and increase schools’ abilities to teach outdoors when they wish to do so**’. Natural Connections is an innovative 4 year demonstration project that aims to increase the number of school-aged children experiencing the full range of benefits that come from learning in local natural environments [LINE].

A key feature of the project is its capacity for ***replication*** and ***amplification*** in other parts of the country.



Objectives

- to stimulate the demand from schools and teachers for **LINE in areas of high deprivation**
- to support schools in building LINE into their planning and practices
- to stimulate the supply of LINE services for schools and teachers

Delivered through:

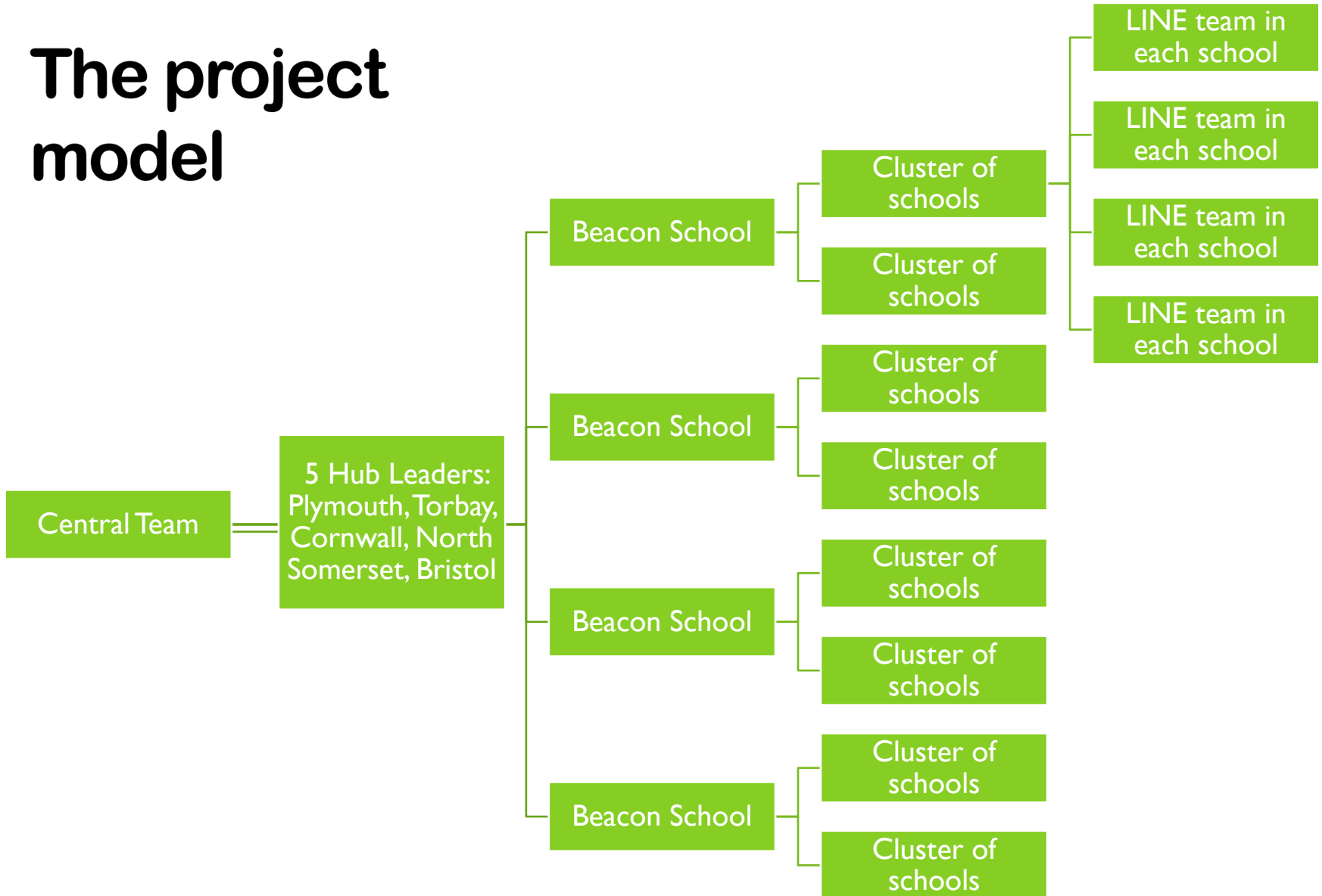
- independent brokerage & professional support
- volunteer development programme
- dynamic & responsive on-line solutions
- robust evaluation

The practical aims are to:

- involve between 150 and 200 primary, secondary and special schools in five areas of the South West
- involve between 200 – 500 volunteers in the project
- develop sustainable ways of embedding LINE in school planning and practice
- develop sustainable models of financing LINE in schools
- comprehensively evaluate the programme to inform future delivery and policy and enable amplification and replication across the South West and beyond



The project model



Highlights – first year of delivery (Sep. 2014)

The Project has recruited

- **106 schools = 33 Beacons & 73 cluster schools**
- one in six schools across the five Local Authorities are part of Natural Connections
- a further 50 schools have been involved in CPD events

Positive impacts of LINE on children:

- 64% of teachers report that LINE supports attainment
- 96% of teachers report that LINE engages pupils in learning
- 82% of teachers report LINE has a positive impact on behaviour
- 96% of teachers report LINE improves children's health and well-being
- 93% of teachers report LINE improves pupils' social skills



Positive impacts of LINE on teachers:

- 93% of teachers reported LINE as very useful or useful in delivering the curriculum
- 90% of teachers reported LINE helps them improve their practice
- 82% of teachers reported LINE enhances job satisfaction
- 71% of teachers reported LINE supports their own professional development
- 100% of teachers reported LINE makes lessons more enjoyable

Over the past 12 months there has been a:

- **50% increase in teachers engaged in LINE (to 66%)**
- **38% increase in Teaching Assistants engaged in LINE (to 62%)**
- **57% increase in the number of volunteers in schools**



Others findings:

- pupil participation in LINE is constant, around 80% of all children in participating schools
- Project is reaching schools in areas of deprivation, with high ratios of Free School Meals
- main curriculum areas supported by LINE are Primary Science, Maths, English and PHSE
- evaluation results are used by schools & the project team to understand impact, address barriers and modify project delivery
- high demand for the Project's CPD programme



Removing barriers

- 62% of schools now report that they now have no limiting factors to delivering LINE, a rise of 25%
- lack of funding as a barrier to LINE has been reduced by more than 50%
- the number of teachers saying they do not know how to relate LINE to the curriculum has halved
- the biggest barrier to schools doing more outdoor learning is now overwhelming 'time to do more'



Schools are investing in LINE...

- 59 improvements to school grounds were reported across 23 schools. These included large scale contractor-led works but also many smaller works
- many of these smaller works stem from pupils' ideas, providing ownership and real life affordable learning opportunities within tight school budgets
- examples of changes include fruit trees, nesting boxes, fire pits, pond creation, paths and seating



Levering in new resources

- In-kind contributions of resources to the Project currently totals £170k, more than 20% of total project value.
- new NC Hub established in association with WWT Slimbridge
- Funding secured to establish a new NC Hub in Devon in association with the Devon Local Nature Partnership, Devon County Council, the Campaign to Protect Rural England and local Health Authorities
- Establishing Natural Connections UK & overseas consultancy opportunities
- Delivering a series of local and regional workshops next year
- Key partner in an international conference on children's health and learning to be held as part of Bristol Green Cities 2015



Natural Connections future ambitions

- to extend the current NCDP delivery and evaluation in participating schools across the southwest beyond 2016
- to expand NCDP delivery within the southwest
- to enable the amplification and replication of the NCDP model in schools across other parts of England

Contacting Natural Connections...

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