



**Strengthening Outdoor Learning
Provision in the Cotswolds and
Evenlode Catchment:
Findings from the 2025 Schools Survey**

Introduction

In Autumn 2025, Cotswolds National Landscape (CNL) invited over 400 schools and school-based outdoor education providers across the Cotswolds and surrounding areas to complete a survey on outdoor learning. Alongside this open call, schools that had engaged with the Smarter Water Catchment (SWC) Pilot Project education programme, delivered by CNL's Everyone's Evenlode team between 2022 and 2025, were contacted directly to provide feedback.

A total of 65 respondents from 57 schools completed the survey, 14 of whom were from 12 SWC pilot schools. This report summarises the findings.

The aim was to better understand:

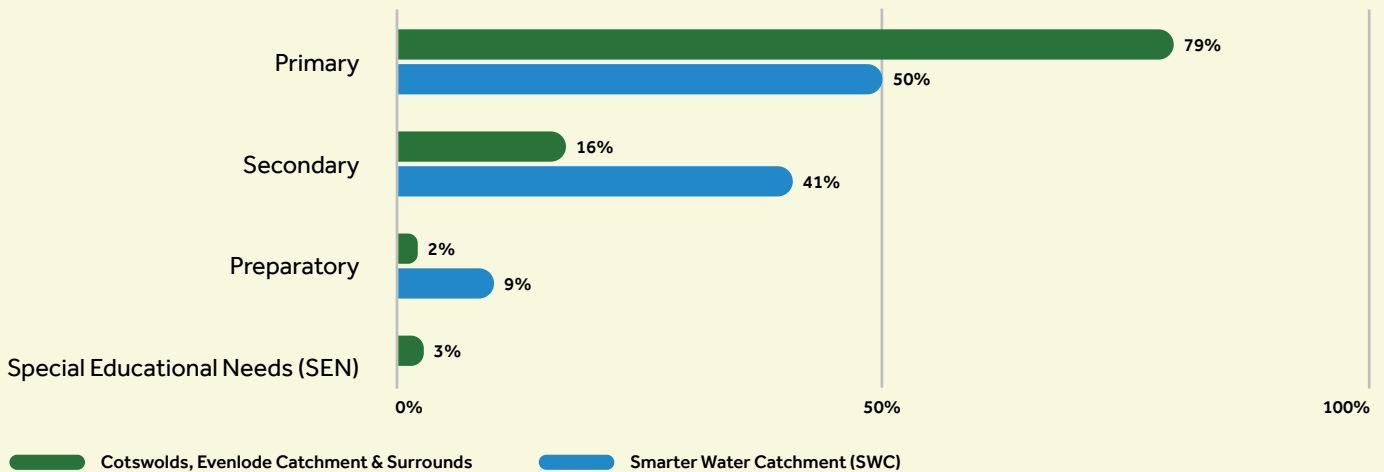
- The current level of outdoor learning taking place in schools.
- Barriers that prevent schools from offering regular outdoor learning or fieldwork.
- What support would make the greatest difference.

Insights from the survey will shape future priorities for CNL and the Evenlode Catchment Partnership (ECP) and help strengthen support for outdoor learning across the region.

Responses were analysed at two levels. The wider dataset includes all schools across the Cotswolds, the Evenlode catchment and surrounding areas, within which the SWC schools form a smaller, nested subgroup. Results are therefore presented both for the overall sample and for the SWC subset to allow comparison between the broader picture and this specific cluster.

Respondent Overview

School type

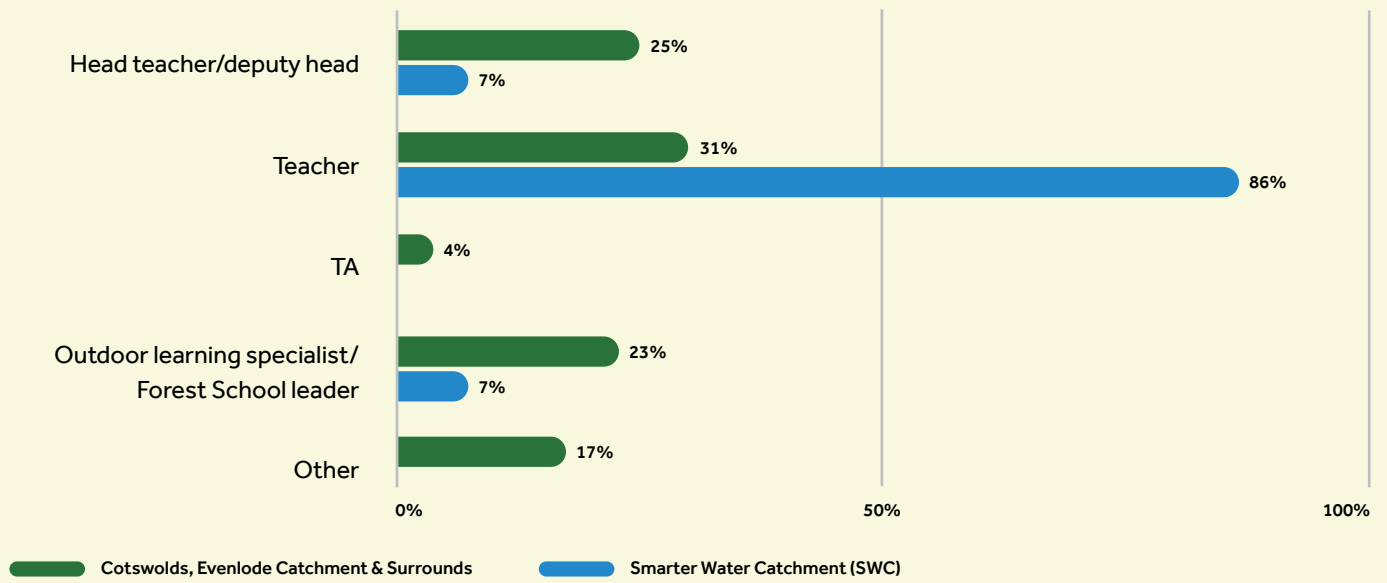


94% of teaching staff surveyed believe their pupils would benefit from more frequent outdoor learning.

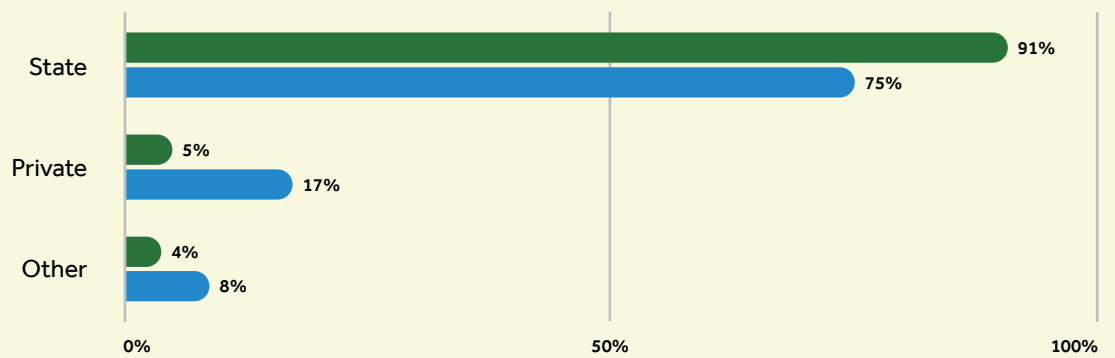
"Developing stronger, ongoing ties with groups such as CNL and ECP as well as the Cotswold Wardens would benefit schools."

SWC Secondary Teacher

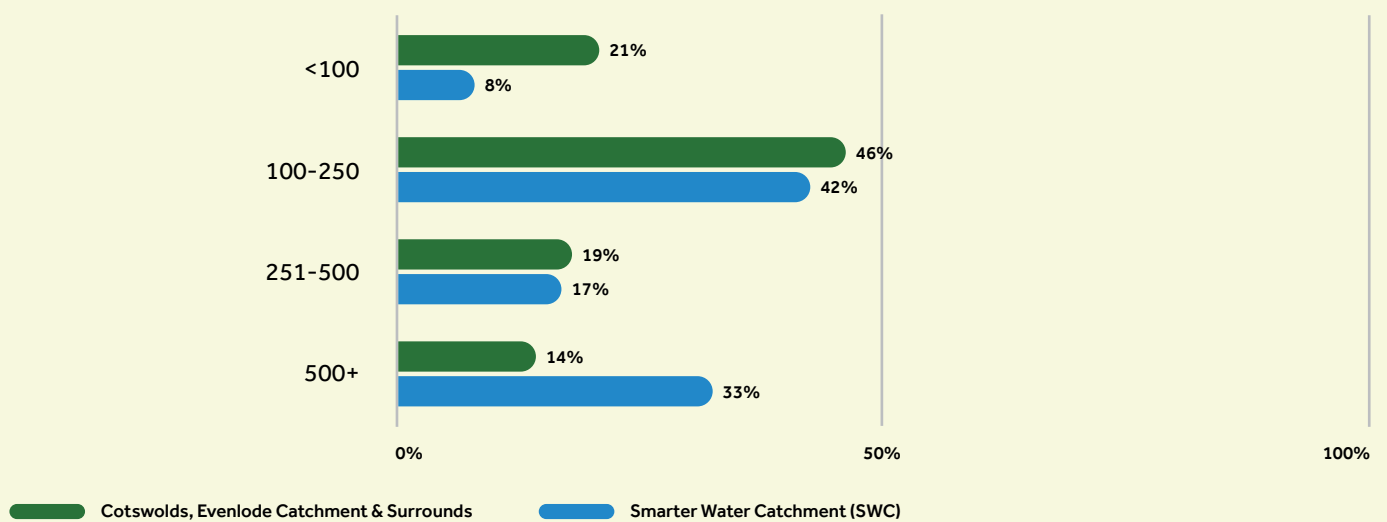
Respondent Role (multiple roles could be selected)



Funding Type



Number of pupils on role



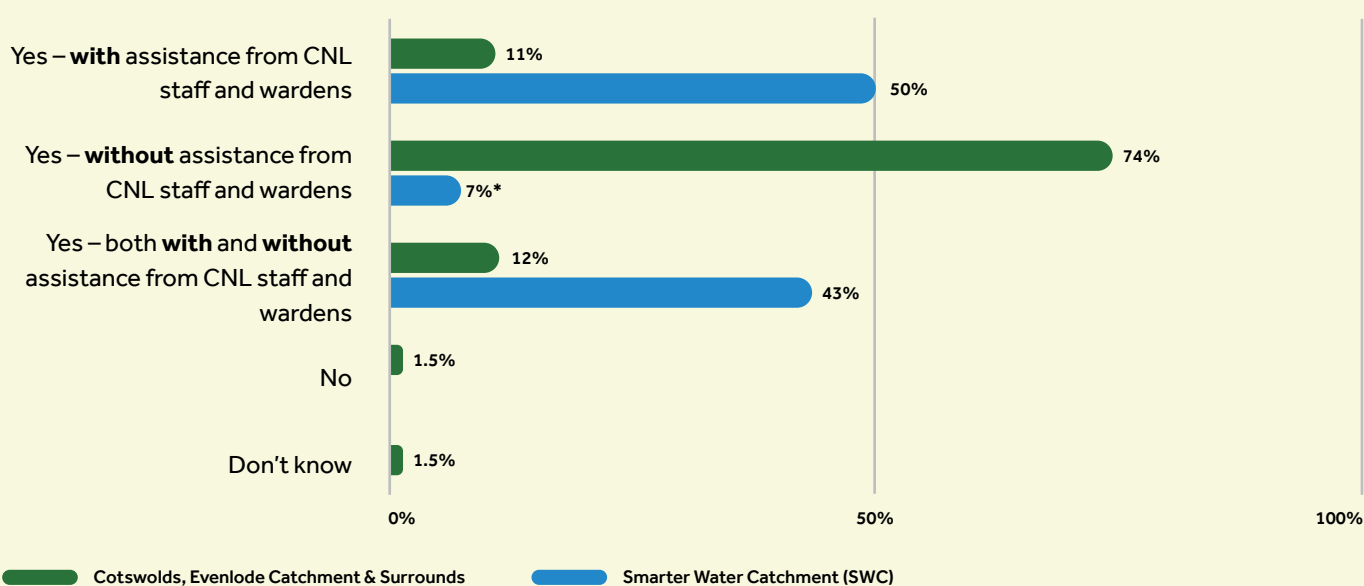
Outdoor Learning Activity

For the purposes of the survey, the term outdoor learning was defined as referring to, “experiences where children leave the school grounds to explore the local environment, such as parks, rivers, woodlands, and nature reserves.”

Almost all schools had offered some form of outdoor learning or off-site visit within the past three years. Across the wider group, nearly one third reported providing outdoor

learning opportunities on a weekly basis. The SWC pilot schools showed lower frequencies overall; however, this is likely influenced by the greater proportion of secondary schools within that group, where timetabling constraints and highly prescriptive curriculum typically reduce the scope for regular outdoor sessions.

Q. Has your school run outdoor learning or field trips in the past three years?



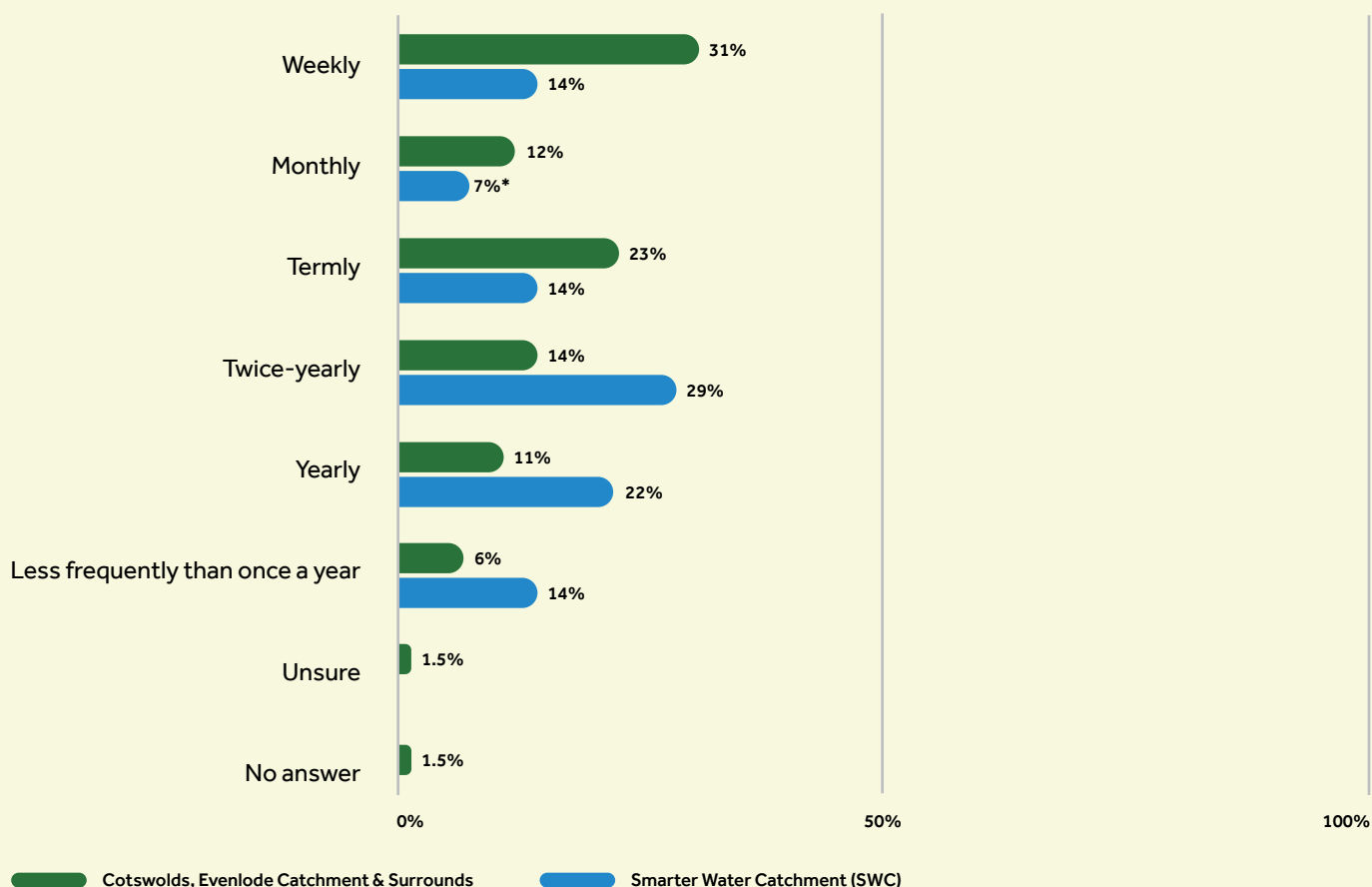
* this anomaly is due to the staff member not having been engaged in post at the time we worked with their school.

97% of teaching staff surveyed felt further teacher training/CPD on outdoor learning would make it easier for their school to deliver outdoor learning experiences.

“We have staff trained in forest school and also therapeutic gardening and the gardening takes place weekly, children are engaged in these sessions and we notice how much our SEN children benefit from this.”

Primary TA

Q. Frequency of outdoor learning:



Perceived Benefits of Outdoor Learning

Respondents consistently expressed strong agreement on the benefits of outdoor learning. A significant majority (over 80% of all respondents) strongly agreed that outdoor learning:

- Strengthens pupils' connection to nature and local environment.
- Has a positive impact on pupils' wellbeing.
- Offers opportunities to pupils who struggle with learning indoors.
- Encourages teamwork and social skills.

Over 93% of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that outdoor learning:

- Develops pupils' practical and life skills.
- Increases pupil engagement in lessons.
- Is relevant to the curriculum.
- Helps pupils retain knowledge and skills.
- Improves pupil behavior.

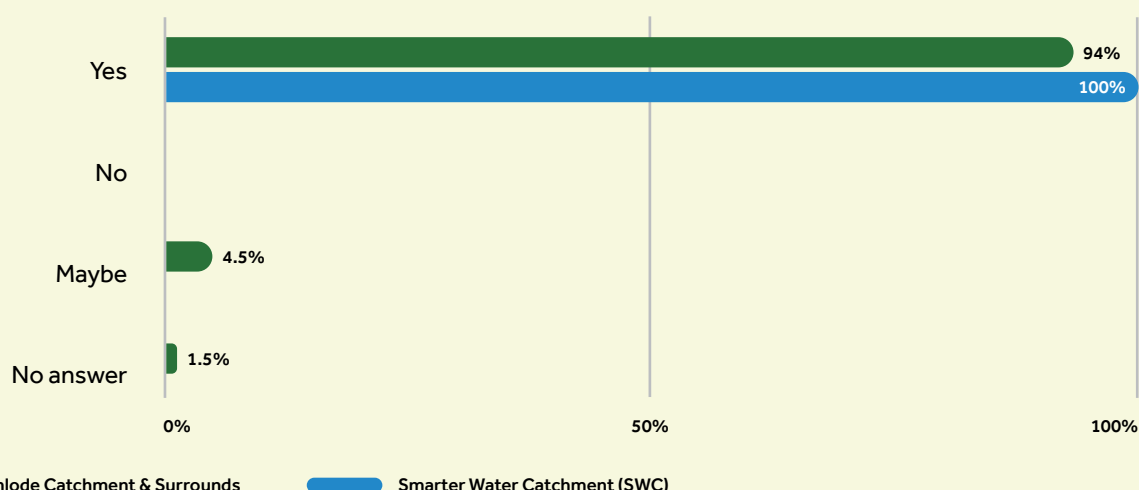
Overall 94% of respondents believed pupils would benefit from more frequent outdoor. All respondents within the SWC sub-group agreed.

97% of teaching staff surveyed believe outdoor learning encourages teamwork and social skills, whilst also strengthening pupils' connection to nature and local environment.

"Everyone's Evenlode has been brilliant in helping us with rivers fieldwork – initially at Combe Mill, and then setting up a new site at Minster Lovell. In particular, the availability of volunteers and specialist equipment have been vital in helping us to run these fieldwork trips."

SWC Secondary Teacher

Q. Would your pupils benefit from more frequent outdoor learning opportunities?



Q. For each statement how much do you agree or disagree?

	Cotswolds and Evenlode Catchment					Smarter Water Catchment (SWC)				
	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral/Unsure	Agree	Strongly agree	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral/Unsure	Agree	Strongly agree
Outdoor learning increases pupil engagement in lessons.	1.5%	0	4.5%	20%	74%	0	0	0	21%	79%
Outdoor learning improves pupil behaviour.	1.5%	0	4.5%	37%	57%	0	0	7%	50%	43%
Outdoor learning is relevant to the curriculum.	1.5%	0	1.5%	40%	57%	0	0	0	36%	64%
Outdoor learning has a positive impact on pupil wellbeing.	1.5%	0	0	15.5%	83%	0	0	0	14%	86%
Outdoor learning helps pupils retain knowledge and skills.	1.5%	0	3%	38.5%	57%	0	0	0	29%	71%
Outdoor learning encourages teamwork and social skills.	1.5%	0	1.5%	15%	82%	0	0	0	29%	71%
Outdoor learning strengthens pupils' connection to nature and local environment.	1.5%	0	1.5%	12%	85%	0	0	0	7%	93%
The benefits of outdoor learning justify the time and resources required.	1.5%	0	6%	23.5%	69%	0	0	0	36%	64%
Outdoor learning offers opportunities to pupils who struggle with learning indoors.	1.5%	0	1.5%	15%	82%	0	0	0	14%	86%
Outdoor learning develops pupils' practical and life skills.	1.5%	0	3%	17%	78.5%	0	0	0	29%	71%

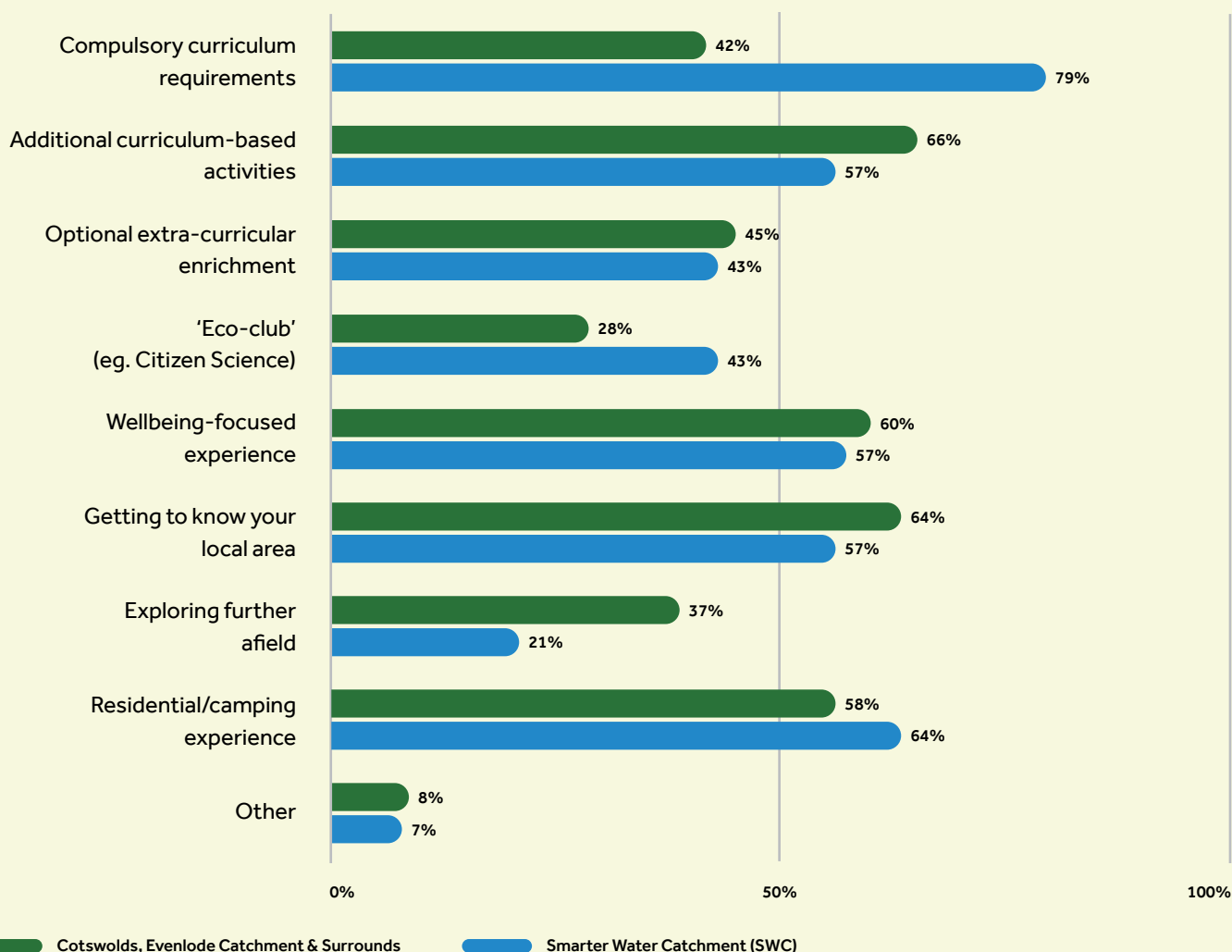
Reasons for Taking Pupils Outdoors

The most commonly cited motivations for facilitating outdoor learning opportunities across all respondents included:

- Curriculum-linked learning (66% wider; 57% SWC).
- Getting to know the local area (64% wider; 57% SWC).
- Wellbeing-focused experiences (60% wider; 57% SWC).
- Residential or camping experiences (58% wider; 64% SWC).
- Eco-clubs or citizen science (28% wider; 43% SWC).

Compulsory curriculum requirements were a more prominent reason for taking part in outdoor learning within the SWC schools subset (79% compared with 42% overall), which may reflect the higher proportion of secondary schools in this group. Higher rates of citizen science being cited as a reason for doing outdoor learning within the SWC group are also not unexpected, as these schools were encouraged to take part in this activity through the Everyone's Evenlode education programme.

Q. What are the main reasons for taking pupils on outdoor learning trips (multiple reasons could be selected)



99% of teaching staff surveyed believe outdoor learning has a positive impact on pupil wellbeing.

“Successful use of local outdoor spaces – such as gardens, woodlands, or playgrounds – [can] bring the curriculum to life, including maths, English, science and not just Forest School.”

SWC Primary Teacher

Barriers to Outdoor Learning

The most significant barriers identified were remarkably consistent across both survey groups.

Major barriers

- Cost of transport.
- Lack of staff time and availability, including supply cover.
- Curriculum pressures, particularly the dominance of core subjects.
- Administrative workload.
- Financial constraints beyond transport.
- Difficulty recruiting volunteers.

Additional barriers

- Limited nearby locations for some schools.
- Lack of staff confidence or skills.
- Accessibility issues for pupils with disabilities.
- Uneven access to facilities such as toilets.
- Leadership priorities focused elsewhere.

“Outdoor learning should be accessible for all. Adaptive equipment would help with this.”

SEN Teacher

Q. To what extent do the following factors act as barriers to you or your school running more outdoor learning sessions or field trips?

	Cotswolds and Evenlode Catchment			Smarter Water Catchment (SWC)		
	No Barrier	Minor Barrier	Major Barrier	No Barrier	Minor Barrier	Major Barrier
Cost of transport	8%	32%	60%	7%	43%	50%
Financial constraints (excluding transportation costs)	8%	46%	46%	7%	57%	36%
Lack of staff time/cover	3%	38.5%	58.5%	0	36%	64%
Curriculum pressures/timetable	8%	32%	60%	0	36%	64%
Administrative workload	42%	46%	12%	21%	72%	7%
School Leadership priorities focussed elsewhere	42%	49%	9%	17%	75%	8%
Difficulty recruiting volunteers	31%	32%	37%	28.5%	43%	28.5%
Lack of suitable locations nearby	55%	40%	5%	43%	50%	7%
Lack of physical resources	34%	48%	18%	36%	50%	14%
Access to facilities (ie. toilets, etc)	40%	51%	9%	29%	64%	7%
Access requirements (eg. disability accommodations)	58.5%	35.5%	6%	50%	50%	0
Lack of staff skills/confidence	34%	55%	11%	36%	50%	14%
Health & safety concerns	51%	43%	6%	36%	50%	14%
Weather concerns	58.5%	38.5%	3%	50%	50%	0

Support Schools Would Find Most Helpful

Across all respondents, the following forms of support were considered “major help”:

- Funding for transport (by far the strongest need).
- Specialist equipment (waders, scientific equipment, etc.).
- Ready-to-use curriculum-linked resources.
- Specialists to help deliver sessions.
- Teacher training and CPD.
- Help connecting with suitable local sites.
- Volunteer support for trips.

Teaching staff involved in the SWC pilot were 30% less likely to say that further training would be a major help. This may indicate increased confidence to plan and deliver outdoor learning independently following their involvement in the programme.

“We had an excellent experience last year where I observed [Everyone’s Evenlode staff deliver] a complete field trip for one of our classes and then I delivered the same field trip for another class in our school, using the equipment available from the first trip.”

SWC Primary Teacher

Q. To what extent would these types of support make it easier for you or your school to deliver outdoor learning experiences?

	Cotswolds and Evenlode Catchment			Smarter Water Catchment (SWC)		
	No Help	Minor Help	Major Help	No Help	Minor Help	Major Help
Funding/subsidy for transport	4.5%	12.5%	83%	7%	29%	64%
Specialist experts available to help lead the sessions	4.5%	21.5%	74%	0	14%	86%
Volunteer support for trips	11%	26%	63%	7%	21%	72%
Specialist equipment (eg. waders, science equipment, meter rules, etc).	0	22%	78%	0	21%	79%
Help connecting with local sites	11%	37%	52%	7%	21%	72%
Ready-to-use teaching resources linked to curriculum	3%	28%	69%	0	43%	57%
Teacher training/CPD on outdoor learning	3%	37%	60%	0	57%	43%
Help with risk assessments	26%	43%	31%	28%	36%	36%

96%

of teaching staff surveyed felt the availability of specialist experts to lead outdoor learning sessions would make delivering outdoor learning experiences easier for them or their schools.

“[Outdoor learning] offers rich opportunities for hands-on, experiential education that supports children’s curiosity and wellbeing.”

SWC Primary Teacher

Additional Comments and Examples of Good Practice

Schools shared a broad range of reflections on outdoor learning, highlighting both strong practice and persistent barriers.

Positive Experiences and Effective Practice

Many schools reported highly successful outdoor learning experiences. Visits to sites such as Combe Mill, Cranham Woods, Westonbirt Arboretum, and Robinswood Hill were praised for their impact on engagement, curiosity, and hands-on learning.

Several schools noted the value of working with external organisations; for example, support from Everyone's Evenlode (CNL/ECP), including volunteers and access to specialist equipment for river fieldwork, was described as "brilliant" and essential for enabling high-quality trips.

Forest School provision remains a cornerstone of outdoor learning for many. Regular sessions – particularly in Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) and Key Stage 1 – were credited with supporting teamwork, problem-solving, resilience, and wellbeing. Some schools extend these experiences through access to local orchards, village woodlands, or whole-day off-site sessions that give pupils greater depth and freedom to explore.

Barriers and Constraints

Financial pressure was the most frequently mentioned constraint. The cost of supply cover, transport, and external provision limits many schools' ability to offer more frequent outdoor sessions.

Staffing capacity and timetable pressures – especially in Key Stage 2 and secondary phases – were also significant barriers. Some schools expressed concern that outdoor

Areas Where Support Would Be Valuable

Schools identified several areas where external support could make the greatest difference:

- Funding for staff cover, transport, resources, and ongoing Forest School provision.
- Access to expert support and additional volunteers, particularly for practical fieldwork.

Residential at sites such as the Wilderness Centre, Hill End/ Youlbury were also highlighted as particularly memorable and enriching.

Schools described strong curriculum links across subjects, including maths (e.g., practical capacity measurements), science, English, and geography.

Variety of setting (including school grounds, nearby green spaces, and further-afield visits) was viewed as vital for maintaining engagement.

100%

of teaching staff surveyed felt provision of specialist equipment would make delivery of outdoor learning experiences easier.

learning is sometimes seen as an "extra" rather than a core approach, making it harder to justify time away from English and maths.

Physical accessibility was raised as an issue for pupils with disabilities, particularly when using woodland sites. Schools requested adaptive equipment and more inclusive design to ensure all pupils can participate.

- Shared or loaned equipment, particularly for specialist activities such as river studies.
- Stronger partnerships with organisations such as CNL, ECP, the Cotswold Wardens, and local community groups.
- Opportunities for professional development, including on integrating the wider curriculum outdoors.
- Inclusive approaches and adaptive equipment to ensure accessibility for all pupils.

Terminology and Interpretation

A few schools noted that the term “outdoor learning” is interpreted differently across settings – ranging from Forest School to curriculum-linked fieldwork to residential adventure activities. These variations may influence how schools responded to the survey questions and should be considered when interpreting the results.

Overview

The findings highlight a clear appetite for more outdoor learning, alongside a strong evidence base of perceived benefits for pupils’ wellbeing, engagement and skill development. Despite this, most schools face substantial practical barriers.

“The positive impact that outdoor learning has on pupil’s engagement, enjoyment and wellbeing has lead us to look at more ways we can teach different areas of the curriculum outdoors.”

Primary Headteacher

Key themes emerging from the data

1. Financial and staffing pressures remain the largest obstacles.

Transport, supply cover, resource costs and limited staffing capacity limit opportunities, even when schools want to provide outdoor learning.

2. Practical support from outside organisations have positive impacts

Greater partnership working, improved access to local sites, and specialist expertise would help schools embed outdoor learning as a regular, sustainable element of teaching.

3. Teachers consistently value the benefits for pupils.

Across responses, staff emphasised how outdoor learning improves engagement, confidence, wellbeing, teamwork and real-world understanding. Many noted that pupils who struggle indoors often thrive outside, reinforcing the importance of maintaining and expanding these opportunities.

4. Teachers spoke positively about Everyone’s Evenlode, the SWC pilot education programme:

Working alongside CNL specialists, volunteers and having access to shared equipment made it easier for teachers to lead fieldwork themselves and embed outdoor learning into regular practice.

Conclusion

This survey demonstrates strong enthusiasm for outdoor learning and clear evidence of its benefits. Schools across the Cotswolds and the Evenlode Catchment want to offer more opportunities but are held back primarily by cost, time, staffing and logistical challenges.

The results provide a strong basis for CNL and the ECP to develop targeted support that addresses these barriers, strengthens partnerships, and enables more pupils to experience high-quality learning beyond the classroom – particularly once financial constraints have been overcome.

“Get children outside for core curriculum subjects.”

Outdoor learning specialist



Cotswolds National Landscape



Author

This report was written by Rowan Wynne-Jones, who works for Cotswolds National Landscape on outdoor learning and rivers-based community engagement as part of the Evenlode Catchment Partnership.

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The Cotswolds National Landscape is a designated Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB), managed and looked after by the Cotswolds National Landscape Board (The legal name is the Cotswolds Conservation Board)