

## **PROOF OF EVIDENCE – SONIA PARSONS & MARLY PARSONS**

1. This statement is written jointly by Sonia Parsons (resident of SCW) and Marly Parsons (Sonia's son) and relates to education of our children and teenagers.

2. Our Mission Statement states:

- We are educating our children with the aim of fostering wholeness, balance and empowerment.
- We are learning from all around us and passing on our knowledge, skills and experience.

3. Our Aims in this area are:

- To encourage healthy, happy and empowered individuals.
- To explore and promote innovative, sustainable practices and ways of living.

4. This statement contributes to showing how at SCW we are meeting the criteria of DMD30 paragraphs (i), (ii), (v), (vi) and (vii).

### **Sonia Parsons, parent**

5. I, Sonia Parsons, have lived at Steward Community Woodland ('SCW') for the last 12 years with my partner John Elsworthy and three children Marly Parsons (18), Daisy Parsons (17), and Asha Elsworthy Parsons (13).

6. I have been home educating my three children for the last 18 years and am a keen gardener, herbalist and mother.

7. I have studied for 4 years with a medical herbalist and for 13 years with the plants directly at SCW. I share my skills and knowledge with my children as part of their educational program.

8. I have worked extensively with school groups and holiday programmes, mentoring young people in nature as well as holding regular Home Education groups and workshops at SCW and elsewhere.

9. Above all, I prioritise holding the home, being present for my children, guiding, nourishing and nurturing them through the challenges of adolescence. Living in community supports me in this roll.

### **Marly Parsons, teenager**

10. I, Marly Parsons (18), son of Sonia Parsons, was raised within the community from the age of 6.

11. I was educated from home up until the age of 13 when I began attending South Dartmoor Community College.

12. I now work part time as a chef in Chagford to save money to start my own business in holding community events that will bring people together from the wider community in a conscious way to share their creative gifts and knowledge.

13. Having Steward Wood as my home for the last 12 years has enabled me to develop into the person I am proud to be today and has given me the opportunity to

concentrate on exactly what I want to achieve in life with the guidance of so many loving and connected people around me.

14. Living on this land with my fellow community members has taught me so many life skills that I cannot now dream of living without, skills that I would not have had the opportunity to learn if I had lived in any other way. These skills of nature connection, permaculture and social skills are vital to a positive future for the whole human race and not just for me as an individual. This is why I find it so exciting to see my friends finding inspiration from the place that is my home and the community members that are my family.
15. Living here has given me a different education all together from the norm which I find amazing and incredibly positive for my musical depth and mental health because it has guided me to discover my passions at an early age, giving me plenty of time to achieve my life goals.

### **The Children & Teenagers at SCW**

16. Three of the children at SCW go to Moretonhampstead Primary School, while two children and three teenagers currently choose to be home educated. One teenager is attending Exeter College. The education they all receive by living at SCW and being a part of the community is a vital part of their lives.
17. All of the children currently living at SCW have lived here most if not all of their lives:
18. Daisy Parsons (17) has lived here for 12 years since she was age 5 and has been home educated throughout and now attends Exeter College with a plan to become a media make-up artist. Through living in community with other children, Daisy developed a unique ability to guide and resolve conflicts among the younger children and would always be a keen helper with communal cooking.
19. Rowan Cruse-Howse (14) has lived here his whole life and has been home educated throughout. Living at Steward Wood has allowed Rowan to combine his two passions, the natural world and science and technology. Where anxiety would usually hold him back, being in this environment has fostered confidence and resilience.
20. Ash Davis (13) has lived here for the last 10 years since he was age 3. He attended Moretonhampstead Primary School from age 5 and continued through to South Dartmoor Community College until January 2016 when he decided to become home educated.
21. Asha Elsworthy Parsons (13) has lived here for 12 years since she was age 1 and has been home educated throughout. Impassioned from a very young age by the flora and fauna that surrounds her, she is currently studying botany from home.
22. Finn Davis (9) has lived here his whole life and began attending Moretonhampstead Primary School at age 5.
23. Aaron Kebble (11) has lived here for 9 years since he was age 2 and attends Moretonhampstead Primary School.

24. Isaac (7) has lived here his whole life and began attending Moretonhampstead Primary School when he was age 4.
25. Sky Hornbeam (6) was born here and has been home educated throughout. Being one of the youngest of the children here, she has benefited greatly from having older children on hand and considers them to be her brothers and sisters. Her favourite thing is climbing the beech tree outside of her home.
26. Wren Hornbeam (3) spends time each week at SCW.

## **Education of Children**

27. It may be hard for others to understand, quantify and prove the benefits of living in harmony with our human, animal and plant relations in a world where separation, disconnection and greed are the norm.\* But having lived this way for the last 12 years, for us and our children this way of life is the only way of life. It allows for the development of skills that enable provision of shelter, fuel, food and water for families without the call for huge financial input. In addition, it creates a deep sense of connection to each other and the natural world, encouraging responsibility and care without the huge and harmful impact that comes with conventional living.

\* There is, however, plenty of research in the area (see Appendix 1 – 'Nature Deficit Disorder').

28. Living here offers our children a unique and holistic way of life with many benefits. The opportunities for education at SCW are abundant, allowing us to offer the children a personalised, individual education that best suits their needs and interests academically, socially, physically and emotionally. It also provides the opportunity for them to learn from each other and from community members and visitors with a wide range of skills. This supportive extended family has allowed the children to learn to cooperate, communicate, accept and explore their environment safely under the guidance of elders and mentors. The children also bring friends home who benefit greatly from the opportunity to play free in the woods and experience a different way of life (see the letter of support by Meg Connolly at Appendix 2).
29. As parents, living at SCW enables us to raise our children consciously with flexibility and choice for both parents to be at home and spend time raising and educating their children. We have benefited from a close knit community offering us support, companionship and advice so often missing in larger communities. This is invaluable to us, enabling us to parent with confidence and gain from the experience of others.
30. The children have developed a love and connection to the natural world and an acute awareness of their impact on it as they are able to see a direct cause and effect, whether it is from chemicals in shower gels or plastic in toys. They feel that they are an integral part of their environment and protect and care for it.
31. Working towards a more sustainable future is a major part of our lives here, so it is for our children. This is evident in their enthusiasm and involvement with community tasks including growing food and medicinal plants, cooking and eating communally, picking produce with friends and showing visitors around their woodland home.

32. There are few places in this world that offer such a wide variety of learning opportunities in a setting which allows for first hand experience! As parents, home educators and community members, we have witnessed that these factors make for some of the deepest learning experiences available to man, woman and child.
33. Leaving the woodland, our homes and this unique and wonderful way of life would have a detrimental effect on us all but most devastatingly on the children as it is all most of them have ever known and would include separating them from what is in effect their beloved family, friends and support network, and the woods they love.
34. It is vital to our children's mental, physical and emotional health and well being to be given the permanent security to live their lives on and with this land and community. This will prevent them from having to endure any more long, drawn out periods of time where their home and lifestyle are under threat, which causes vast amounts of worry, anxiety and stress for them all. Permanent planning permission would give them the confidence to create permanent low impact futures here.

## **APPENDIX 1 – Nature Deficit Disorder (by Ollie Hornbeam)**

In his influential book '*Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children From Nature-Deficit Disorder*', author and child advocacy expert Richard Louv writes about the staggering divide between children and the outdoors. In his book, he brings together a new and growing body of research indicating that direct exposure to nature is essential for healthy childhood development and for the physical and emotional health of children and adults.

In this book, he coins the term 'Nature Deficit Disorder' which describes the cost of alienation from nature, among them: a diminished use of the senses, attention difficulties and higher rates of physical and emotional illnesses. He directly links the lack of nature in the lives of today's young people to some of the most disturbing childhood trends, such as the rises in obesity, attention disorders, and depression.

In 2012 the National Trust released a report entitled 'Natural Childhood' in which the foreword states '*We have the evidence: both of the harm done by this state of affairs, and the many benefits of allowing children between the ages of seven and 12 the freedom to explore the natural world. The goal is nothing less than to kick-start the creation of a new way of life for our nation's children.*' The report claims UK children are losing contact with nature at a dramatic rate, and their health and education are suffering as a result. Some of the causes mentioned were traffic, the lure of video screens and parental anxieties to keep children 'safe' indoors. Evidence suggests the problem is worse in the UK than other parts of Europe, and may help explain poor UK rankings in childhood satisfaction surveys. Some of this evidence shows that children learn more and behave better when lessons are conducted outdoors, that symptoms of children diagnosed with ADHD improve when they are exposed to nature, and also children say their happiness depends more on having things to do outdoors than owning technology. However, the reality for most of the UK's children is revealing with some statistics showing that the area that children are allowed to range unsupervised around their homes has shrunk by 90% since the 1970s. The National Trust launched a consultation to tackle Nature Deficit Disorder in the UK as the report states that '*if we do not reverse the trend towards a sedentary, indoor childhood – and soon – we risk storing up social, medical and environmental problems for the future.*'

The connection between mental health and a love of wildlife are mentioned in a 2003 'Nature and Psychological Well-Being' report from English Nature. According to this report connecting with nature not only brings physical benefits, but can greatly improve our emotional, mental and spiritual health too: *"The natural world offers the potential for significant positive effect on individual and community psychological wellbeing."* These findings are now being taken very seriously indeed and English Nature's successor, Natural England, recently released a report (A review of nature-based interventions for mental health care, Feb 2016) and are now committed to find ways to help more people access the benefits that come through practical experiences in the outdoors.

Although 'Nature Deficit Disorder' is not a medically recognised condition David Pencheon, a medical doctor who now heads the National Health Service's sustainable development unit has been quoted *"There's undoubtedly a phenomenon that's not good for health, which is about not giving access to outdoors or green space, safe risk-taking and so on. But I wouldn't say we've identified a medical condition. In fact we don't want to 'medicalise' it, we should see it as part of everyday life - if you medicalise it, people say 'you'd better go to your doctor and take a pill'."*

Another benefit of connecting with nature is increased environmental awareness . How can we expect our children to face the numerous and urgent environmental challenges if they feel no real link with their own natural heritage? As Jim Burt of Natural England points out, *"If we want to build a greener, more environmentally sustainable future, then we need to find ways of reconnecting our children to the natural world."*

## **APPENDIX 2 – Letter of Support by Meg Connolly**

Application Number: 0054/15

Name: Meg Connolly

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Tel: 07826281341

Email: megconnolly@yahoo.com

Date and time of comment left: 17-02-2015 16:35

Comment Type: Support Proposal

Comment:

Living in Moretonhampstead would not be the same without the Stewards wood community people to visit and be inspired by. They consistently and open-heartedly welcome me and my daughters whenever we are in need of support, and connection with nature and woodland. We have been on courses at the woods, and the community freely impart knowledge that we can't get anywhere else around here. My children get a chance to roam safely without cars driving around, and to experience a wider more sustainable way of living which is an invaluable learning for them, that isn't met by their local school. I fully support their application and hope they get to stay in the woods, as they are caring, thoughtful, loving custodians and are willing to inspire, teach and share with others, unlike many private land owners.