The Countryside Live! events, organised by the Countryside Foundation for Education (CFE), provide a unique opportunity for urban children to explore a whole new area of possibilities and learning, through becoming aware at first-hand of what goes on in the countryside.
Links with science
Many events and stands introduced children to science ideas and skills. These included:

- identifying live water creatures, with Environment Agency staff and others;
- opportunities to ‘meet’ and find out about animals (otters, birds of prey, sheep, working dogs, ferrets, geese, ducks, fish, dragonflies) and in some cases to touch and groom them (horses, cows, pigs) with the help of experts;
- opportunities to work with materials and therefore learn about their properties (willow and basket weaving, wool spinning, wood turning, charcoal burning, corn dolly making, coppicing);
- healthy eating stands (Soil Association, various food tents);
- forensic work (Hampshire Constabulary’s Wildlife Crime Department);
- agricultural machinery, what it does and how it works (tractors and equipment for milking, shearing, gardening);
- environmental issues as part of team problem-solving activities with the Trailblazer project.

Reactions
Comments from teachers, children and exhibitors alike typified the enthusiasm generated by these events:

The variety of events and their child-centred delivery was great, from sheep-shearing to hounds, to falconry. Superb event, which was appreciated by all participants. There were some lovely comments from the children.

We learnt about animals and fruit and vegetables – like when they come out in the bulbs and when they are actually growing.

You could learn about different fruits you’ve never seen before.

The children had a wonderful time. They particularly enjoyed the gundog display and the storyteller.

I learnt how to make a corn dolly.

You have got some corn and you needed to keep threading it. I can remember what she said. Backwards, forwards, left and right and you just keep on going.

Please can we have it again next year?

And tellingly:

The chance for pupils to experience real-life learning situations such as those offered by all the people is worth a week’s learning in the classroom.

The independent evaluation of the event also indicated that children’s confidence and their speaking and listening skills were developed through one-to-one conversations with a wide range of ‘experts’ whom they would not normally meet. For example, during the fishing activity (where many children caught fish from the lake, and identified them against specimens in a tank before releasing them) children were learning the techniques of casting, careful observation of their float and the right time to ‘strike’, through asking questions, listening and watching their individual tutor. And this activity was not dominated by boys: most fishing tutors said the girls learnt more quickly!

An important aspect of the event from the teachers’ point of view was the level of organisation and pre-event briefing provided, not only in terms of the teachers’ handbook but also the health and safety planning.

In future, more advance notice of the event and more help with curriculum links may need to be given, so that schools can build the event into their science work more effectively.