

Successful approaches to learning outdoors

A report by
HM Inspectors

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Foreword

Recovery from COVID-19 is ongoing and is likely to continue for some time. The benefits of outdoor learning are helping to mitigate challenges and support recovery by providing positive learning experiences. We know that outdoor learning connects children and young people with the natural world, with our built heritage and our culture and society, and encourages lifelong involvement and activity in Scotland's outdoors. We also know that well-constructed and well-planned outdoor learning supports our children and young people to develop the skills of enquiry, critical thinking and reflection necessary to meet the unpredictable challenges of life in the 21st Century.

During their visits, HM Inspectors found strong examples of outdoor learning across schools, settings and partnerships. They found that staff are rising to the challenges of the pandemic and employing new and creative ways to engage learners using the outdoors. In doing so, many staff are learning new skills and developing new partnerships.

We know children and young people enjoy first-hand experience outdoors, whether within the school grounds, in urban green spaces, in Scotland's countryside or in other environments. Such experiences motivate our learners to become successful learners and to develop as healthy, confident, enterprising and responsible citizens.

I hope that the findings contained in this report will help practitioners across Scotland to continue to grow and develop planned, quality outdoor learning experiences for children and young people.



Gayle Gorman
HM Chief
Inspector of
Education

Introduction

The Scottish Government's Education Recovery: Key Actions and Next Steps document outlines that HM Inspectors of Education will undertake national thematic reviews as part of the contribution of education to Scotland's COVID-19 Recovery.

This is the first of three national thematic reviews by HM Inspectors of Education describing current practice on key aspects of Scottish education. It is intended to celebrate successes in Scottish education during an extremely challenging period. It is also intended to promote improvements in Scottish education by drawing on the professional view of HM Inspectors of Education to share more widely what is working well in establishments across Scotland. This view has been developed through discussions with practitioners, stakeholders, learners and observing practice at first hand.

We hope this report will stimulate professional reflection and dialogue about how establishments are integrating outdoor learning as part of their practice. As well as sharing our key messages about current practice in outdoor learning, this report includes case studies of establishments which demonstrate effective practice.

This report is based on evidence gathered during visits undertaken during November and December 2021. HM Inspectors of Education visited 4 stand-alone early learning and childcare settings; 17 primary schools, including 13 with nursery classes; four secondary schools; 3 special schools; five community learning and development services (CLD); one Gaelic school and one all-through school. The 35 settings and schools visited covered a geographical spread across Scotland, in both urban and rural areas. Appendix 1 provides a list of the establishments visited.

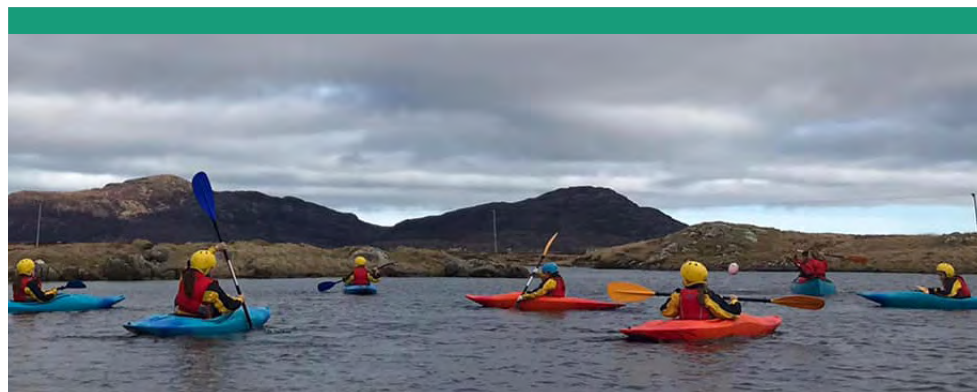


Background

COVID-19 has presented challenges for Scottish education, not least the need to continue to offer children and young people high quality learning. For a number of establishments, COVID-19 has also provided a catalyst for increasing opportunities for children and young people to learn outdoors.

Since the initial COVID-19 lockdown in March 2020, Scottish education has continued to develop and change approaches to delivering education for children and young people. Staff adapted the learning they provided during the first national lockdown and when they moved to a period of remote learning in January 2021. Staff increased knowledge, developed skills and explored the benefits of using the outdoors to support curriculum delivery. A number of staff teams revisited their vision and values and then refreshed their curriculum rationale to reflect better a renewed focus on learning outdoors.

We have found that circumstances arising from this pandemic have accelerated the breadth and depth of outdoor learning across sectors. Practitioners are continuing to maximise the potential of the outdoors to enhance children's and young people's learning experiences. Outdoor learning is increasingly becoming an embedded feature of our learners' everyday experience.



In this report, the term 'outdoor learning' encompasses the entire range of learning experiences undertaken outside; whether it is reading a book outside or participating in an overseas expedition. This report recognises the place of the full spectrum of outdoor learning experiences. Our vision for outdoor learning in Scotland continues to reflect the aspirations outlined in Curriculum for Excellence through Outdoor Learning¹:

all children and young people are participating in a range of progressive and creative outdoor learning experiences which are clearly part of the curriculum

schools and centres are providing regular, frequent, enjoyable and challenging opportunities for all children and young people to learn outdoors throughout their school career and beyond

teachers and educators embed outdoor learning in the curriculum so that learning in the outdoor environment becomes a reality for all children and young people.

1. [Curriculum for Excellence through Outdoor Learning](#)

Key Findings

HM Inspectors of Education found that in establishments where approaches to outdoor learning are effective, this contributes to improved outcomes for children and young people. These outcomes include benefits to wellbeing, improved skills such as problem solving and communication, as well as an enhanced understanding of the world in which we live. As a result of our visits, we have highlighted six components of practice which when taken together create conditions where learners can experience high quality outdoor learning.



1. **Leadership** - Effective leadership of outdoor learning is a key factor in establishments that are fully using the outdoor environment to improve outcomes for children and young people.

2. **Supporting the delivery of the curriculum** - Increasingly, outdoor environments are being used to deliver the curriculum. Learners' views, ideas and interest are influencing how staff plan opportunities for children and young peoples' learning outdoors.

3. **Children's and young people's experiences** - Learning in and about the outdoors is becoming a stronger, more regular feature of children's and young people's learning experience.

4. **Wellbeing** - Staff are using outdoor learning effectively to support the wellbeing of children and young people.

5. **Partnerships** - Partners are involved effectively in the planning, delivery and evaluation of outdoor learning.

6. **Professional learning** - High quality professional learning is building staff confidence in delivering learning outdoors.

1. Leadership

Effective leadership of outdoor learning is a key factor in establishments that are fully using the outdoor environment to improve outcomes for children and young people.



“Our consultation with parents and stakeholders confirmed that, as well as aspiring to high levels of attainment, our community wants young people to become ‘rounded’ individuals. Outdoor learning has great potential towards that objective.”

(headteacher)

Senior leaders share a clear rationale for outdoor learning with staff, parents, partners, children and young people. It is central to their overall vision and they actively promote the benefits of outdoor learning. This positively influences the extent to which outdoor learning is valued and prioritised by stakeholders. Senior leaders provide clear guidance and support to enable staff to make effective use of the outdoor environment as a context for learning and teaching. Leaders have used outdoor learning to aid their response to COVID-19 restrictions.

Effective approaches to both strategic and operational leadership are important components in embedding outdoor learning. Senior leaders take a well-planned approach to incorporating outdoor learning into the work of the setting or school. They support staff to ensure the safety of learners and plan the provision of resources such as time, space and physical materials. This helps to ensure successful day-to-day delivery of outdoor learning.

Senior leaders increasingly help staff, parents, children and young people to develop further their understanding of how outdoor learning can be used to support learning and teaching across the curriculum. By encouraging stakeholders to recognise the benefits of outdoor learning, and offering leadership opportunities in this area, senior leaders are building capacity within the setting or school.

Robust approaches to self-evaluation are instrumental in supporting the leadership and delivery of high quality outdoor learning. Senior leaders gather data on outdoor learning from a variety of sources. They seek the views of learners, staff, parents and partners, and carry out learning observations. Leaders analyse this information to help identify evidence of impact on outcomes for children and young people and to plan for further improvement.

1

CASE STUDY

Drymen Primary School, Stirling Council

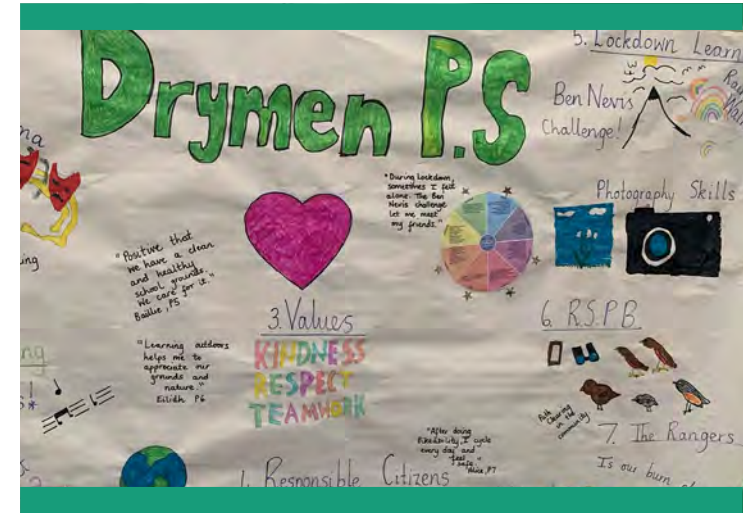
The headteacher provides strong leadership in all aspects of outdoor learning. Staff and parents feel that this is a significant factor in the school's success in developing approaches to outdoor learning which is having a positive impact on outcomes for children.

Staff, parents and children reviewed the vision and values of the school. They highlighted a collective desire to use outdoor learning effectively as a context for learning and teaching. The school community recognised the importance of learning about and through nature and were keen to improve the quality of the curriculum by taking it outdoors. As a result, staff and parents identified outdoor learning as a key priority for school improvement.

Parents are empowered to take a lead role in making effective use of the outdoor environment. For example, a 'Ben Nevis' walking challenge organised by

the Parent Teacher Association provided opportunities for personal achievement. The entire school engaged in 'Drymen Dances', an enjoyable outdoor group activity that supported building connections across the community. This has been of particular importance following periods of remote learning.

A community leadership approach enables groups of children to take responsibility for taking forward specific aspects of the school's work, including areas that focus on the outdoors. Each group creates an action plan, considers how they will provide evidence of impact of improvement and how they will share the outcome. For example, the 'Tree Champions' have responsibility for taking care of the orchard the children have planted within the school grounds. With support from the staff from Loch Lomond and The Trossachs National Park, children are learning how to measure the growth of the trees and how to look after them.



Self-evaluation activity provides senior leaders and staff with a clear understanding of the impact of outdoor learning on outcomes for children. This includes the use of baseline measures against which progress is measured. Staff regularly seek the views of all stakeholders and identify and share the action taken as a result. Qualitative and quantitative data clearly demonstrates a significant increase in the provision of outdoor learning opportunities. The level of enjoyment experienced by children, has also increased significantly.

2

CASE STUDY

Gartocharn Primary School and Early Learning and Childcare Centre, West Dunbartonshire Council

The headteacher has a sustained focus on implementing high quality outdoor learning and is committed to ensuring that Gartocharn Primary School and Early Learning and Childcare Centre becomes a centre of excellence in this area. The senior leadership team and staff are successfully implementing a long term, strategic plan to achieve this aim and as a result, children experience highly effective learning experiences within the extensively developed outdoor space.

Staff have developed an approach which ensures equal importance to all learning, including that which takes place outdoors. They plan activities which support children's progress and enable children to participate in outdoor activities daily. The approaches to outdoor learning are wide ranging and provide children with rich learning experiences. These include the use of expeditions, outdoor challenges, community projects and play with natural materials.

Across the setting there is a focus on eight overarching skills including leadership, teamwork and communication. Staff consistently refer to these skills during indoor and outdoor lessons. They use age appropriate language to describe the skills to children, which helps children to make links between their learning experiences. As a result, children have a very good understanding of the skills they are developing and applying in different contexts.

Staff use progressive planning frameworks to make clear links between outdoor learning and Curriculum for Excellence experiences and outcomes. They include interdisciplinary outdoor learning opportunities and provide specific criteria to help children to evaluate their own learning. The approach to outdoor learning provides children with the opportunity to transfer learned skills to real-life situations and is contributing to overall attainment.



Children have positive peer relationships, and this is enhanced by the provision of social groups that are led by the headteacher. Staff note that the change of environment and increased freedom outdoors has helped to build strong relationships across the school. This is particularly important given the impact of the pandemic on social relationships and the isolation felt by many learners. Overall, staff report that children's behaviour has improved as a result of outdoor learning.

The leadership team and staff continue to evaluate progress and seek to improve further children's outdoor learning experiences.

3

CASE STUDY

Inveraray Primary School, Argyll and Bute Council

The headteacher and staff have a clear, well-developed strategy to deliver outdoor learning. Staff and all stakeholders agreed and devised the school's rationale for outdoor learning. Senior leaders made use of research to help inform their decision about the time allocated to outdoor learning. The approach taken is flexible and responsive to the needs of children.

Most teachers engage in professional enquiry projects linked to aspects of outdoor learning. Overall, results show that learning outdoors has a positive impact on children's enjoyment and readiness to learn. Teachers also identify outdoor experiences as a factor in developing the children's social skills and wellbeing. The decreasing number of support referrals and the information gathered through staff observations, demonstrate an



improvement in children's resilience and emotional self-regulation.

The senior leadership team use robust self-evaluation to evidence the impact of outdoor learning on children's outcomes. This includes gathering the views of parents and children. Most parents agree that there are improvements to children's engagement, knowledge, and attitude to school as a result of the outdoor programme.

“As a staff team we are hugely passionate about outdoor learning. Having the support to plan outdoor learning is vital so that staff feel confident and motivated to provide these opportunities...ultimately this is underpinned by empowering staff as group leaders with the desire and creativity to provide positive and meaningful experiences for our learners.”

(headteacher)

2. Supporting the delivery of the curriculum

Increasingly, outdoor environments are being used to deliver the curriculum. Learners' views, ideas and interests are influencing how staff plan opportunities for learning outdoors.

A number of settings and schools have continued to build on the use of the outdoor environment since March 2020. They have increased the use of the outdoors to support delivery of the curriculum. Across settings and schools, staff report that children enjoy learning outdoors and have increased opportunities for personalisation and choice. Contexts for learning are deeply relevant to children's and young people's interests and allow for meaningful links to their immediate community and beyond.

Leaders and staff recognise the many benefits of providing outdoor learning experiences that are embedded in and contribute to all areas of the curriculum. Examples include using outdoor environments to inspire creative approaches to literacy, and investigations as part of science and technology.

Early learning and childcare settings provide a wide range of interesting and stimulating outdoor experiences to support and extend children's learning across the curriculum. This includes the

use of everyday objects and natural materials to develop children's creativity, inquiry and curiosity.

In primary schools, curriculum planning includes consideration of learning across the four contexts of Curriculum for Excellence (CfE). Staff recognise that outdoor learning offers many opportunities for learners to deepen and contextualise their understanding within curriculum areas. Staff provide well-planned experiences including woodland and beach visits, community walks and water sports. The variety of opportunities enable children to develop a wide range of skills and knowledge, supporting achievement across the curriculum.

Increasingly, in secondary schools, there is a clear commitment to using outdoor environments to contribute to learning and wellbeing, and the development of skills for learning, life and work.

Almost all secondary schools continue to provide young people with the opportunity to gain skills and achieve through recognised

and accredited youth awards. Teachers across faculties are making effective use of the outdoors to deliver the curriculum. This includes developing photography skills, growing and harvesting food and using the outdoors as a stimulus for deepening their understanding of key themes in novels.

Overall, positive relationships, confidence building, and resilience are highlighted as key positive outcomes for children's and young people's health and wellbeing through experiencing learning outdoors.

“There are good jobs in the outdoors around the town, in forestry and farming, but also in activities that attract tourists.”

(learner)



1

CASE STUDY

Beeslack High School, Midlothian Council

Staff make effective use of learning outdoors to support delivery of the curriculum. They recognise there are many benefits to using this approach to enhance young people's experiences and build on young people's learning and progress. Staff talk to learners frequently about the advantages of the outdoor activities they are taking part in and the skills they are developing as a result. Young people articulate clearly the benefits and understand how these relate to the world of work. This includes improved problem-solving skills and the ability to negotiate with others in a team.

There is a very strong focus on equity to ensure that no learner misses out. This includes a significant investment over time in specialist outdoor equipment such as mountain bikes, boots and jackets.

Almost all faculties plan the use of learning outdoors to enrich

learners' experiences. This includes practical activities to develop skills in measuring, compass and bearing work, gathering and handling data about organisms in science and in religious and moral education, going outside to listen to sounds and practise simple meditation.

In the new enhanced provision, outdoor learning is very much part of the curriculum, and linked to individual personal learning plans of the learners. In order to plan for progressive learning experiences, teachers take account of young people's previous experiences of outdoor learning. As well as universal approaches, staff use the outdoors to enhance targeted approaches for young people who require additional support with their learning. Young people who access the hub in mainstream benefit in a variety of ways. For example, young people build physical ability, develop organisational skills and become more effective listeners.



“It (outdoor learning) gives young people opportunities to be successful and to see that they are capable.”

(principal teacher)

2

CASE STUDY

Rashielea Primary School, Renfrewshire Council

As a result of COVID-19, and with safety in mind, the school planned actions for recovery with groups of children learning outdoors on a rotational basis. Staff, over time, have accessed a range of national and local information about outdoor learning. This has increased their knowledge and given them the confidence to provide stimulating and challenging outdoor experiences to support delivery of the curriculum. All children take part in a minimum of two varied outdoor learning sessions per day, irrespective of the weather.

“The headteacher tries really hard to address any poverty gap. She helps provide everything children need for learning outside.”

(parent)

Learning is flexible to take account of what is planned as well as responding to children’s interests. Staff plan learning experiences using cross cutting themes, such as sustainability, to support children to

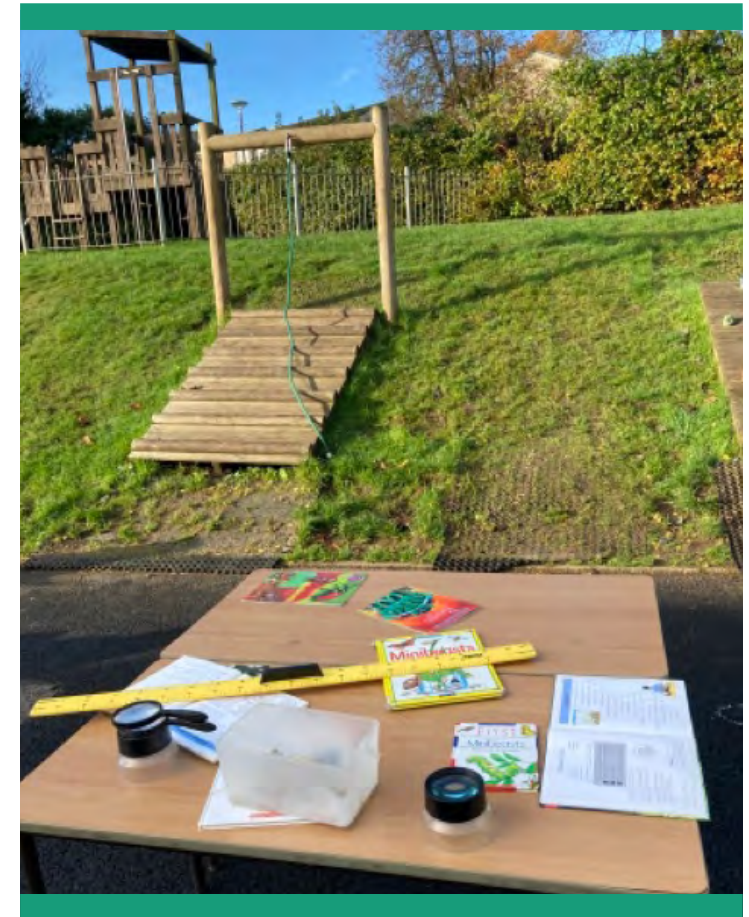
see the relevance of learning to their local area and beyond.

“The outdoors has given us such freedom. We have truly been able to reconnect with each other as a school community.”

(headteacher)

The pandemic has accelerated the pace of planned improvements in outdoor learning. All children are participating in an increasingly wide range of progressive and creative outdoor learning experiences. At the early stages children learn successfully through play and at the upper stages children work towards successfully achieving the John Muir Award.

Children tell a powerful story about the benefits of outdoor learning to their mental, intellectual and physical wellbeing. They understand that learning in all curricular areas can take place outdoors. Children’s voice, their actions and emotions all express a love for learning.



“I feel the breeze in my mouth and the smell of nature in my nose when I come outside.”

(learner)

3. Children's and young people's experiences

Learning in and about the outdoors is becoming a stronger, more regular feature of children's and young people's learning experience.

COVID-19 has presented many challenges for settings and schools and recovery will continue for some time. Leaders and staff respond skilfully to reduce the impact of these challenges on children and young people. They adapt learning



and teaching to ensure creative, stimulating and challenging outdoor experiences support children and young people to continue to learn and make progress.

Overall, settings and schools have increased significantly the range of outdoor experiences provided to children and young people. These include increased time spent learning within the immediate and wider community. Staff, parents, partners and learners share the numerous benefits from accessing increased opportunities for learning outdoors. These include increased confidence, independence and an appreciation for nature, sustainability and biodiversity.

Leaders and staff demonstrate a strong commitment and passion for inclusive outdoor learning experiences for all children and young people. A number of schools have accessed additional funding for resources to ensure all learners are able to participate in outdoor learning. Staff often use the outdoors to support children who may be experiencing barriers to

learning, recognising that learning outdoors provides enhanced opportunities for achievement and success. Staff share and exemplify the benefits of learning outdoors and the positive impact on children's and young people's skills development. This includes building positive peer relationships, the ability to talk about learning and to understand and alleviate risk in a range of situations.

Children and young people benefit greatly from learning new skills and applying them in rich, challenging outdoor contexts. They are motivated to learn through participation in enjoyable, high quality outdoor activities. Learners can talk about what they are learning, their successes and the progress they are making.

“Outdoor education is essential for young people who are struggling with self-regulation. It provides a safe way for them to engage in learning even if they refuse to attempt learning in the class. Being outdoors reduces anxiety but also provides a challenge, which seems enjoyable. If it's enjoyable, it can help you build a positive relationship and that is the basis for learning and teaching.”

(principal teacher)

1

CASE STUDY

FossoPLAY Outdoor Nursery, Perth and Kinross Council

In FossoPLAY Outdoor Nursery, staff engage well with research and have a strong belief in the importance of positive, nurturing relationships, a deep connection with nature and the benefits of being outdoors.

Open-ended, child-led play is at the heart of FossoPLAY's approach to learning.

Staff do not place a limit on children's learning. They empower them to be creative, ambitious, imaginative and curious. Children are encouraged to share their ideas and interests to guide the development of experiences, for example the creation of a wheelbarrow parking area. This evolved after children could not find the wheelbarrows when they were left scattered around the woods. The parking area has numbered posts and each wheelbarrow is numbered to support the development children's numeracy skills.

Staff support children well to persevere and experience

success, learning something new from each attempt. They use two key questions, "Is it safe?" and "Is it kind?" These key questions are helping children to make informed judgements and to develop self-regulation skills. Children learn how to manage risk effectively, from the very youngest age. They are physically confident and demonstrate balance, resilience and an ability to make sensible judgements about outdoor play situations.

Children benefit from extended periods of time spent outdoors. They are highly motivated in their play and actively lead their own learning. Children are developing a good understanding of the importance of fresh air and exercise. They talk about the importance of rest and sleep to help their bodies recover and grow. As children spend almost all of their time outdoors, they have a good awareness of the importance of hand hygiene and understand why warm, waterproof clothing is important.



“It’s amazing watching the children become more confident and resilient in the outdoors. They have to be allowed to fail. We support them to keep trying and then really celebrate those wins and achievements.”

(modern apprentice)

2

CASE STUDY

Sgoil Dhalabroig, Comhairle nan Eilean Siar

Staff at Sgoil Dhalabroig have a very well developed outdoor learning programme, which offers a range of challenging and interesting experiences. This includes using the loch adjacent to the school to deliver water-based activities, such as kayaking, sailing and wild swimming. Appropriately qualified staff deliver these lessons. The school surroundings include a wild area, a mountain bike track, cross-country running track, a garden with raised beds and chicken coop. Historical, geographical and environmental settings throughout South Uist further enhance teachers' opportunities to plan for children to extend their knowledge and develop a range of skills.

Staff use the extensive range of available outdoor settings to enrich children's experiences on a daily basis. The school's surroundings provide a stimulating context for children to practise their creativity, investigative, research and practical motor skills. For example, they use the 'old boat in the wild area' as a



stimulus to create stories about life at sea. Older children are designing and building a wooden bridge across a muddy patch in the wild area.

Children are developing an extensive knowledge of the history of their local community. They are able to apply their knowledge of environmental issues to understand the threats that climate change poses to South Uist. Older children are developing their understanding of responsibility and leadership skills when assisting groups of younger children in the outdoors.

As a direct result of the variety and relevance of outdoor experiences, children are more engaged in their learning. They are more confident and able to talk about the positive impact outdoor learning is having on their progress.

“The school’s outdoor learning programme has greatly enhanced children’s enjoyment of learning.”

(parent)

4. Wellbeing

Staff are using outdoor learning effectively to support the wellbeing of children and young people.



“You feel that being out in the fresh air clears your mind and you can think better.”

(pupil)

Increasing use of the outdoor environment as a context for learning is helping settings and schools to implement COVID-19 mitigations. Senior leaders ensure there is a clear and strategic approach to using outdoor learning to support the physical and emotional wellbeing of children and young people effectively.

Children and young people recognise the positive impact that being outdoors has on their wellbeing and on their approach to learning. They are increasingly able to reflect on the range of skills that they are developing across the four capacities of CfE. Staff make use of the outdoor environment to encourage learners to build positive relationships and improve self-awareness and understanding of others.

“.....nurture groups have given children the space and time to focus on wellbeing through the shared focus of creating the garden. They have ownership and pride”

(pupil support assistant)

Staff make effective use of outdoor learning to support children facing challenges and provide enhanced opportunities for achievement and success. Staff consider carefully the development of emotional wellbeing through outdoor experiences and make good use of the wellbeing indicators to support their work. This helps learners, including those who have emotional and social difficulties, to build confidence, sustain friendships and develop resilience. Opportunities to learn outdoors in a range of contexts across the curriculum has a positive impact on children’s and young people’s physical wellbeing.

“Transition from nursery into P1 is the best it has been this year and that’s because of outdoor learning.”

(practitioner)

1

CASE STUDY

Tarbolton Primary School and Early Years Centre, South Ayrshire Council

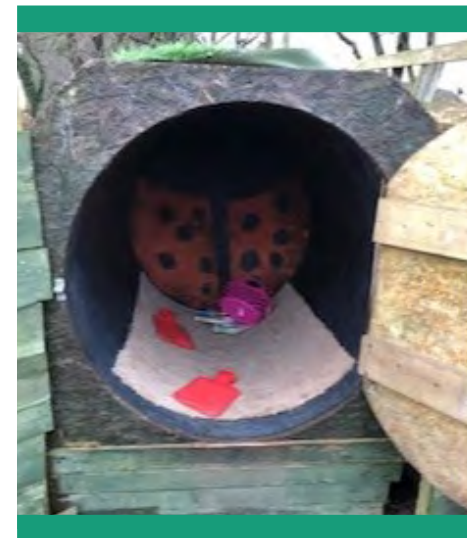
The headteacher at Tarbolton Primary School and Early Years Centre has a vision that most of the learning in the school will take place outdoors. Children, staff and parents share this vision and understand and promote the benefits of outdoor learning. The headteacher and staff are committed to using the outdoors to nurture children and meet their full range of wellbeing needs.

Staff place an important emphasis on the development of children's confidence and self-esteem. They create an environment where children are empowered to manage risk independently and encouraged to explore their own interests. Children are developing a love and appreciation of being outdoors. They show resilience and problem solving skills.

Learning outdoors benefits the children's physical development and wellbeing. For example, they demonstrate stamina, agility,

balance and coordination as they negotiate different and challenging terrains. Outdoor learning has been an effective catalyst to engage children who require support with their learning and improve their wellbeing.

As a result of accessing stimulating and challenging outdoor experiences, children at early level are much more independent and resilient in their learning. Staff and parents report that there is a correlation between learning outdoors and children's improved engagement and motivation when learning. They also note that as outdoor learning is embedded across the school, behaviour both in class and outside is improving significantly. The approach is supporting the development of positive relationships. In particular, during the pandemic this has been a safer way for children to learn together and develop social skills.



2

CASE STUDY

Woodland School, The City of Edinburgh Council

The skills based approach to outdoor learning at Woodland School fully supports the wellbeing of young people. Staff deliver the curriculum in creative and interesting ways, providing a well-planned range of outdoor learning activities within the local community and beyond. The activities encompass life and vocational skills, curriculum subjects, environmental awareness, sports, physical activity and wellbeing opportunities. The school provides valuable outdoor learning experiences across almost all areas of the curriculum. Young people consider the skills being developed as meaningful in preparation for life beyond school.

The staff make strong and purposeful connections between outdoor learning and the skills required to improve wellbeing, life and employability. For example, a few young people are now able to attend weekend football games without staff support, as a result of skills developed through outdoor activities. They demonstrate increased confidence in accessing challenging sporting activities and



cooperate with less familiar young people and adults. This is improving their resilience and independence as well as promoting the health benefits of physical activity.

Young people develop specialised skiing skills on the local dry ski slope and indoor real snow centre. They build up important and valuable wellbeing skills including resilience, confidence and independence before accessing an annual residential trip to either a Scottish or international ski resort. Commendably, the school extends the offer of the ski programme for young people who have transitioned from school to the next stages of adult life.

Young people participate in the Duke of Edinburgh's Award and the John Muir Award. They learn how to



plan expeditions and participate in activities such as hiking, orienteering, meal planning, camp preparation, cooking outdoors and overnight camping. Young people value the skills developed through their participation in these awards. They recognise that these activities improve their physical strength, confidence and wellbeing.

“In this school we use the outdoors in so many ways to promote learning. This expands the learner’s awareness of how creative they can be. Visitors will see learners using the outdoors as dynamic scenery for outdoor performances, to support sensory and communication needs, for growing food for the kitchen, orienteering, wellbeing walks, sporting activity and having fun through play.”

(teacher)

5. Partnerships

Partners are involved effectively in the planning, delivery and evaluation of outdoor learning.

Increasingly schools, ELC settings and CLD services are working well with partners to deliver outdoor learning. Partnerships with other establishments, organisations and businesses broaden and deepen children's and young people's learning outdoors and enable them to achieve success in wider contexts.

Staff increasingly make use of opportunities for community involvement to improve their work, providing rich approaches to learning outdoors. Children and young people participate in community-based activities such as gardening, food growing and donating to local foodbanks to develop their confidence and creativity. This helps to meet individual and group needs and prepare children and young people for their future roles in society. Staff actively seek to link community projects to accreditation and award programmes. In a few schools, a wide range of accredited programmes such as Dynamic Youth, Hi 5 and John Muir Award provide opportunities for young people to gain recognition for their achievements. During the pandemic,

partners in one local authority adapted the expedition component of the Duke of Edinburgh's Award to ensure that young people achieved their award whilst gaining a positive outdoor experience

Staff work in genuine partnership with a variety of partners to provide rich and inclusive educational outdoor experiences for children and young people. Staff work in genuine partnership with a variety of partners to provide rich and inclusive educational outdoor experiences. Children and young people participate actively in initiatives led by partners such as outdoor play and conservation. School staff and partner agencies learn from each other and value each other's contributions.

In a few settings and schools, staff and other partners such as youth workers and Active Schools Coordinators are evaluating the impact of their contributions to outdoor learning. As a result, they are able to refine practice with the aim of improving learning experiences for all children and young people. In a few settings and schools, partners are working



“Young people had more freedom and flexibility in their learning outdoors.”

(Active Schools Coordinator)

with senior leaders to mitigate against the cost of learning outdoors such as residential trips. These settings and schools make funds available to support cases of support families who are experiencing economic challenges. and show effective and tactful use of these to ensure that learners are able to participate. Due to ongoing COVID-19 restrictions, many Primary 7 children were unable to participate in outdoor, overnight school camps. In response, a few local authorities are working with partners to deliver whole day events offering a wide range of challenging outdoor activities such as kayaking, hill walking and abseiling.

1

CASE STUDY

Oban High School, Argyll and Bute Council

Outdoor learning is a core part of COVID-19 recovery for Oban High School. There is a clear shared rationale for outdoor learning that is well understood by partners who have been involved in shaping this. The rationale outlines the benefits in terms of improved knowledge and appreciation of the natural world, skills development and wider benefits associated with wellbeing.

Partners play a significant role in helping to deliver outdoor learning across all aspects of the curriculum. Local community groups, third sector organisations, public sector and business organisations all deliver aspects of outdoor learning that enhance learner experience. As a result, partners have a shared understanding of what they are trying to achieve for young

people. They make a significant difference to outdoor learning experiences being viable.

In many instances, both Oban High School staff and partners jointly plan, prepare and deliver outdoor learning experiences. These cater for a wide range of learners including those who require personalised support and those undertaking advanced qualifications. For example, the school has very strong links with the local college who deliver a number of courses, including national progression awards in rural skills, construction and joinery at Oban High School. Many young people who participated in the courses are now exploring related opportunities within the world of work.

“Outdoor learning is used as a creative response to improve engagement of learners.”

(headteacher)



2

CASE STUDY

Community Learning and Development, Clackmannanshire Council

Clackmannanshire CLD team developed and delivered a successful Primary 7 outdoor activity transition programme in the spring of 2021. The programme is an effective partnership between CLD, Sauchie Active 8, Play Alloa and Ochil Youth and Community Improvements. Funding was secured from the Youth Work Recovery Fund to deliver outdoor activities free of charge to pupils across Clackmannanshire Council.

Most activities were delivered by CLD workers, including some who are qualified outdoor instructors. Other specialists also support the programme. These included a qualified outdoor education instructor from Youth Scotland, the local rangers service and third sector staff. A key strength of the programme is the partnership with teams from different organisations working together to provide a beneficial programme for children despite the challenges of COVID-19. The relationships and team working



have grown over time and the positive impact on partnership working is still clearly evident.

In addition to improving their confidence, children participating in the programme gained in self-belief and a sense of achievement. Three hundred and two children completed a Dynamic Youth Award with many taking part in an individualised and personal award for the first time. Most children thrived in the outdoor environment. Children further developed a range of skills



successfully including team working. Youth workers were able to offer reassurance to children about moving to secondary school. This helped to build children's confidence and reduce their levels of anxiety. Parents were grateful that their child had the opportunity to engage in activities in their local community.

6. Professional Learning

High quality professional learning is building staff confidence in delivering learning outdoors.



The increasing use of the outdoors as a response to pandemic restrictions has prompted senior leaders to support staff to make effective use of the outdoors to provide children and young people with high quality learning experiences. In



the majority of schools and settings, the pandemic has accelerated staff participation in professional learning related to outdoor learning. This is helping to build the confidence, skills and motivation of staff to deliver outdoor learning.

Outdoor learning is a stronger feature in ELC settings, having been embedded over time. Practitioners are increasingly engaging in collaborative approaches, with peers across the local authority, to improve the quality of outdoor learning. They discuss their practice, share knowledge and experiences and support each other.

In other sectors, there is an increasing recognition of the role that outdoor learning can play in supporting children and young people achieve success. A few settings and schools work with external partners to support professional learning. This is particularly evident in those cases where staff deliver national programmes, for example Forest Schools, the John Muir Award and the Duke of Edinburgh's Award. In one local authority, the outdoor learning team are building the capacity of staff to deliver accredited awards. This is supporting a greater number of learners to achieve national recognition and success. In a number of schools, staff are exploring the range of accredited awards that can be used to support children and young people to achieve success and develop important lifelong skills.

1

CASE STUDY

Ormiston Primary School, East Lothian Council

The school has worked effectively with the Parent Council, the local authority, East Lothian Outdoor Education Team and local country estates, to identify experiences best suited to being delivered outdoors. Due to the impact of COVID-19 the school has had to creatively review its approaches to outdoor learning. For example, Primary 3 and 4 were able to engage in a virtual residential type experience.

The headteacher deploys staff effectively to take leadership roles across the school. Supported by the local authority, a range of high quality professional learning opportunities including teacher residency programmes, have helped staff to develop knowledge and skills necessary to deliver a wide range of outdoor learning experiences.

Staff work well collegiately across the school to plan and deliver learning. Staff share their skills and knowledge with colleagues,



contributing to a supportive and collaborative culture. This is leading to children being offered more regular outdoor experiences.

Partnership approaches taken by the school to combine leadership and outdoor learning programmes encourage children to develop their personal leadership skills within the school, their homes and the wider community. They provide children with a context in which they can develop their learning and skills. The progressive nature of the programmes is leading to children attaining awards from the Scottish Qualification Authority and the John Muir Award by the end of Primary 7.



“I had never been away from my mum overnight before and I got a bit upset at night time. My teachers and leaders were great, gave me cuddles and made me feel so much better.”

“I will definitely have the required skills and will be putting myself forward to be a P7 leader for the P3 camp.”

(learner)

2

CASE STUDY

Flowerbank Early Childhood Centre, East Ayrshire Council

At the start of the centre’s outdoor learning journey not all staff had the confidence to take children’s learning outdoors. Following professional learning opportunities during lockdown, all staff are now passionate and enthusiastic about outdoor learning. They speak confidently about their approaches and the impact on outcomes for children.

A range of planned experiences for the outdoors are delivered by staff, including yoga and mindfulness. Children’s engagement has been high and parents have commented positively on the impact of these programmes.

Staff are leading the development of outdoor learning, in their role as ‘Outdoor Champions’. Staff meet weekly in small cohorts to plan learning outdoors. Planning is responsive to meet children’s individual needs. As a result,



almost all children are engaged in their learning and are happy and confident in the outdoor environment.

The outdoor spaces afford children the opportunity to learn and develop in a safe and stimulating environment. Children and staff are developing their resilience, which is having a positive impact on their lives.

“I am very proud of my team as they have embraced all outdoor professional learning opportunities, which have had a positive impact on experiences for all children.”

(head of centre)

Appendix 1: settings and school visited

HM Inspectors would like to thank local authorities, staff, children, young people, partners and parents for their engagement during the visits and willingness to share their experiences of outdoor learning.

ALL THROUGH SCHOOL

- [Breadalbane Academy](#)
Perth and Kinross Council

EARLY LEARNING AND CHILDCARE SETTINGS

- [Flowerbank Early Childhood Centre](#),
East Ayrshire Council
- [FossoPLAY Outdoor Nursery](#),
Perth and Kinross Council
- [Lauriston Castle Forest Kindergarten](#),
The City of Edinburgh Council
- [Orchard Nature Nursery](#),
Dumfries and Galloway Council

PRIMARY SCHOOLS

- [Bantaskin Primary School and Nursery class](#)
Falkirk Council
- [Barcaldine Primary School](#),
Argyll and Bute Council
- [Chatelherault Primary School and Nursery Class](#)
South Lanarkshire Council
- [Drymen Primary School](#)
Stirling Council
- [Dyce Primary School and Nursery Class](#)
Aberdeen City Council
- [Gartocharn Primary School and ELC Centre](#)
West Dunbartonshire Council
- [Gavinburn Primary School and ELC Centre](#)
West Dunbartonshire Council
- [Inveraray Primary School and Pre-five Unit](#)
Argyll and Bute Council
- [Kilmacolm Primary School and Nursery Class](#)
Inverclyde Council
- [Ormiston Primary School and Nursery Class](#)
East Lothian Council

- [Rashielea Primary School](#)
Renfrewshire Council
- [St Andrews Fox Covert Primary School](#)
The City of Edinburgh Council
- [St Andrew's Primary School and Nursery Class](#)
North Lanarkshire Council
- [St David's RC Primary School and Nursery Class](#)
Midlothian Council
- [Stow Primary School and Nursery Class](#)
Scottish Borders Council
- [Tarbolton Primary School and Early Years Centre](#)
South Ayrshire Council
- [Urafirth Primary School and Nursery Class](#)
Shetland Islands Council

SECONDARY SCHOOLS

- [Beeslack High School](#)
Midlothian Council
- [Grantown Grammar School](#)
The Highland Council
- [Inveralmond Community High School](#)
West Lothian Council
- [Oban High School](#)
Argyll and Bute Council

SPECIAL SCHOOLS

- [Clackmannanshire Secondary Support Service](#)
Clackmannanshire Council
- [Linburn Academy](#)
Glasgow City Council
- [Woodlands School](#)
The City of Edinburgh Council

COMMUNITY LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT

- [Outdoor Education Service](#)
Orkney Islands Council
- [CLD Service](#)
Clackmannanshire Council
- [EPIC Days](#)
The City of Edinburgh Council
- [Highlife Highland](#)
The Highland Council
- [Education \(Outdoor Learning\)](#)
Argyll and Bute Council

GAELIC SCHOOL

- [Sgoil Dhalabroig](#),
Comhairle nan Eilean Siar

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