



Outdoor Learning Strategy
for Highland's Children
and Young People
2012 - 2015

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This is the time to develop the partnerships necessary at national, local authority, community planning and school level to overcome the barriers and sustain outdoor learning opportunities for all children and young people.

David Cameron, Chair of the Outdoor Connections Advisory Group

Foreword by Councillor Linda Munro – Children’s Champion

Outdoor Learning

To skip and to tumble, to run and to roam, to hide and to seek, to fall and to rise; seeing pictures in clouds and stars in the night sky; puddles for jumping and trees that were ever, ever so high.

That is how I remember playing. It was always outside, with friends of mixed ages and the oldest in charge. That was child’s play.

My childhood took place, first, on the tenement streets of the Gorbals and then, when I was six-years old, our family had a real rise in status. The Glasgow Corporation gave us a house in the brand new Castlemilk housing scheme. My mother was ecstatic, a house with its own bathroom. Until then we went to the public baths.



Every Saturday my grandfather took us for a day out, to Glasgow Green or Richmond Park, or maybe bramble picking. We learned about trees and swans, we fed ducks and discovered dew on spider webs, pure magic. In the dead of winter we walked miles to the Barras and listened to the rapid banter of the street traders. A long-winded way of saying I believe that play and outdoor learning is not restricted to green, leafy and ‘safe’ areas.

Learning, playing or just being outdoors is an essential part of both childhood and adolescence, especially if young people are to develop an active lifestyle and experience the highest standards of physical and mental health.

As Children’s Champion for the Highland Council I am proud of our commitment to children’s issues. The value of the outdoors, as a place to play and learn, is a theme found in each of our key policies for children and young people - Getting it Right for Every Child, the Early Years Framework, Curriculum for Excellence and our Play Strategy.

And when we listen to young people and their representatives, they are quite clear that they want more opportunities to be outdoors.

The Outdoor Learning Strategy is part of our response to creating the Highland’s Curriculum for Excellence, which aims to develop young people, who are successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens and effective contributors. Academic research, and my own experience, both tell me that playing and learning outdoors can make a very significant contribution to these aims.

Introduction

The Highland Council values the unique natural heritage of its Highlands/Gaidhealtachd, which is internationally renowned and includes the UK's biggest national park, Cairngorms National Park. The people and communities of the Highlands are privileged to live in and enjoy access to its magnificent outdoor environment. The Highland Council, with its new responsibilities for managing all services relating to children and young people, is committed to promoting their enjoyment and understanding of that environment.

At the Education, Culture and Sport Committee meeting on 12th January 2012 it was accepted that Outdoor Learning must be a key component of Curriculum for Excellence for Highland children and young people. Along with the Scottish Government, the Highland Council shares the **vision** expressed in *Curriculum for Excellence Through Outdoor Learning* (Learning and Teaching Scotland, 2010) that:

- All children and young people should participate in a range of progressive and creative outdoor learning experiences which are clearly part of the curriculum.
- Schools and centres should provide regular, frequent, enjoyable and challenging opportunities for all children and young people to learn outdoors throughout their school career and beyond.
- Teachers and educators should embed outdoor learning in the curriculum so that learning in the outdoor environment becomes a reality for all children and young people.

Members acknowledged that this vision would only be realised by developing effective partnerships. High Life Highland, as the council's key partner in Outdoor Learning, was well placed to provide support through its Outdoor Education personnel.

The council intends its various services to work collaboratively with one another and with the widest possible range of partners to build a strategic, authority wide plan to ensure children and young people have greater access to quality outdoor learning experiences. Outdoor learning is an important element of Health and Wellbeing. However, it should not be seen as a 'bolt on' but as part of an integrated plan to develop, in children and young people, skills such as communication, problem solving, environmental awareness, working with others, literacy and numeracy.

The Committee thereafter:

AGREED to endorse the further development of partnerships to help realise its vision;

AGREED that the experience of the Education, Culture and Sport Service in relation to the development of outdoor learning be fed into the Council's Play Strategy; and

AGREED that the barriers to outdoor learning be investigated and consideration be given to how it could be implemented in all Highland schools.

The Director undertook to incorporate these issues in a further report to Committee with the draft outdoor learning strategy. This *Highland Outdoor Learning Strategy: 2012-15* has been prepared by the Highland Outdoor Learning Group, which was formed in spring 2010 as an advisory partnership, chaired by a headteacher, and comprising: school staff from all sectors; Education Scotland, Cairngorms National Park and other national or local partners;; the council's Ranger Service and (now within High Life Highland) the Outdoor Education Officer, Active Schools Coordinators and Youth Development Officers.

Highland Outdoor Learning and Curriculum for Excellence

The increased emphasis on outdoor learning in 21st century Scottish education originated in public concern and specialised evidence that children are increasingly separated from the natural environment, that they have little opportunity to learn to deal with risks in modern society, and that they exercise physically less than they should. This led to the most comprehensive and integrated national scale research programme on outdoor education ever undertaken in the UK or overseas through the Outdoor Connections development programme, which was initiated in 2005, by the Scottish Executive and led by Learning and Teaching Scotland (LTS). The research provided strong evidence for the health and educational benefits of education outdoors and led to national policy promoting and supporting the delivery of outdoor learning across all sectors. It is now accepted that “the journey through education for any child in Scotland must include opportunities for a series of planned, quality outdoor learning experiences”. In 2010, Learning and Teaching Scotland published *Curriculum for Excellence through Outdoor Learning*, which provides a rationale and guidance to help embed outdoor learning within the Curriculum for Excellence. These educational developments also resonate with the widest aspirations of public policy in the Highlands, where the unrivalled outdoor environment is a key asset for the social and economic wellbeing of our communities.

The Highland Council is committed to every child and young person in the Highlands receiving a progressive experience, from 3 to 18, of planned, quality outdoor learning experiences. Specifically:

1. The Highland Council endorses the importance of outdoor learning and welcomes the guidance provided in *Curriculum for Excellence through Outdoor Learning* and its associated support materials.
2. Our vision for outdoor learning in Highland is that:
 - Highland’s children and young people all participate in a range of progressive and creative outdoor learning experiences which are clearly part of the curriculum;
 - Highland schools and centres provide regular, frequent, enjoyable and challenging opportunities for all children and young people to learn outdoors throughout their school career and beyond;
 - Highland’s 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.
3. The Highland Council commends the frequent use of local, natural and built outdoor settings, including school grounds, as well as opportunities for excursions and residential experiences in the delivery of outdoor learning across the curriculum.
4. The Highland Council commends the imaginative use of the guidance contained in *Curriculum for Excellence through Outdoor Learning* and its associated support materials.
5. The Highland Council recognises competing priorities within the new curriculum and recommends that each establishment and area grouping should set its own priorities and timescales in improvement planning towards the full vision for outdoor learning.
6. The Highland Council intends that the outdoor learning strategy will be implemented within existing resources and encourages an enterprising use of devolved budgets and the many grants that are available for Outdoor Learning (See page 9).

For Highland's Children – Outdoors

The importance of outdoor experiences for children and young people has long been advocated by the Highland Council. It has been a major theme in policy relating to childhood play since the introduction of our play strategy for 2006-2010, *All to Play For*, which predated the emphasis on the outdoors in Curriculum for Excellence.

The revised “For Highland’s Children” Play Strategy, *Play Matters, 2012-2015* was approved by the Joint Committee for Children and Young People on 26 March 2012.

Throughout the development of the play strategy, it has been recognised that the natural environment is an ideal playground for children and young people, that outdoor active play guards against childhood obesity, that it helps to develop a physically active lifestyle going on into adulthood, and that being outdoors, active and sociable are protective factors in mental health.

Play Matters encourages people living in communities, people working in the public, private and voluntary sectors and people elected to community councils and Highland Council to work in partnership to deliver the desired outcomes for children and young people.

The integration of services for children across the authority, which became a reality in April 2012, opens exciting new partnership opportunities on behalf of children by uniting actions of the Health and Social Care Service with those of the Education, Culture and Sport Service.

In *Play Matters*, Highland Council states its commitment to “all children having access to rich, stimulating play experiences, with safeguards from inappropriate risk, but full of challenge, offering them the opportunity to explore, through freely-chosen play, both themselves and the world”. Access to such unstructured, outdoor play experiences clearly complements the provision of “planned quality outdoor learning experiences to every child and young person in the Highlands”, which is the commitment of our Outdoor Learning Strategy. There is a wealth of experience in outdoor education within the Education, Culture and Sport Service (and in High Life Highland), gained both before and during the development of Curriculum for Excellence, which should be fed into the operation of the council’s Play Strategy. Equally, the Play Strategy Delivery Plan offers guidance on how play can enhance learning, particularly in primary schools.



Partnership in Action

Allsorts After School Club uses the shared campus of Dornoch Academy and Dornoch Primary School. Its daily sessions go outdoors three days a week. The Club has invested in weather-proof outfits and head torches to allow outdoor free play all year round.



Supporting Outdoor Learning: The Highland Council

The Highland Council takes seriously its responsibilities to support all employees and volunteers, who enable our children and young people to participate in outdoor learning. This support flows naturally from the authority's statutory duties in the Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974 and the significant extensions in the 1999 Regulations, to the 1974 Act.

In the case of all off-site excursions the authority's support consists mainly in:

- providing written guidelines for heads of establishments and excursion leaders including advice on risk assessment;
- having emergency procedures in place for dealing with major incidents/emergencies;
- assessing and approving proposals for off-site excursions;
- monitoring and reviewing safety during off-site excursions and activities;
- providing access to technical advice where necessary;
- ensuring training needs are addressed;
- providing access to named staff for advice;
- providing appropriate insurance cover.

Guidelines and procedures

Establishments must adhere to the council's *Procedures and Guidance for Conducting All Off-site Excursions*. Heads of establishment must ensure that teachers, and other staff in charge of pupils, understand and comply with these procedures, in addition to accepting their common law duty to act as any reasonably prudent parent would do in the same circumstances. The procedures, based on the Scottish Executive's *Health and Safety on Educational Excursions (2004)*, are web-based and kept continually up to date, for example in taking account of the Equality Act 2010. In Highland all educational excursions are planned with equality in mind. When recording excursions staff have a useful 'checklist' as well as links to guidance, for example, to ensure disability is no barrier to participation.

Approval, Monitoring and Recording

All Off Site Excursions must be submitted to the head of establishment for approval prior to their taking place. In the case of "home-stay" and overseas excursions additional approval is required from the Head of Service or Area Manager respectively. Checking by the Outdoor Education Officer is also mandatory in the case of adventurous activities.

The Highland Council has invested in the web-based system **EVOLVE** to manage the approval process for excursions. All excursions are recorded on a single electronic form created by logging onto www.highland-council-excursions.org.uk. The internet provides ready access and a simple recording process for any visit leader. All heads of establishment have been provided with a username and password for approving excursions and also for providing every potential visit leader with a username and password. The Highland Council requires all heads of establishment to use EVOLVE when approving off-site excursions.

Advice and Training

The Highland Council delivers advice and training through its key partner **High Life Highland**, whose specialist Outdoor Education staff are responsible for promoting Outdoor Learning, for the necessary safety management systems, including EVOLVE, and for providing technical advice with regard to adventurous activities. All necessary guidance and advice, including named contacts, are available by accessing its Outdoor Education service on the High Life Highland website, www.highlifehighland.com.



Removing Barriers to Outdoor Learning

The research in Scotland demonstrated that issues, which act as barriers to outdoor learning, were both perceptual and actual. The main perceptual barriers were:

- preconceptions about the practitioner's role in relation to the curriculum;
- preconceptions and fears about health and safety, risk assessments and liability.

The most commonly mentioned actual barriers were:

- financial cost to pupils and schools;
- adult/pupil ratios required;
- time involved in organising events;
- uncertainty of the Scottish weather;
- disruption to classes.

Feeling Free to Break Out

The Curriculum for Excellence allows us to rethink the unconscious presumption that classroom interiors are the natural setting for teaching about the exterior world. In planning more frequent lessons outdoors, teachers can be confident that they are fulfilling Highland Council's intention that "the journey through education for any child in Highland should include opportunities for a series of planned, quality outdoor learning experiences".

Feeling Confident in Outdoor Learning

Regarding safety, risk and personal liability, the first principle for feeling confident about leading others outdoors is to understand limitations. The main limitation is that Highland Council procedures will not allow approval of adventurous activities (hillwalking, canoeing etc.) unless the leader possesses the necessary qualification and competence. On the other hand, teachers may feel quite confident about undertaking any other learning activity in low-risk environments (e.g. school grounds, local community, open country, beaches etc.). The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) has issued clear statements that it fully supports schools arranging a wide range of out-of-school activities and wants to ensure that mistaken and unfounded health and safety concerns do not create obstacles. Risk-benefit analysis typically identifies huge benefits *versus* minimal risks. The key message from HSE to teachers is that school procedures should encourage participation, be proportionate to the level of risk and avoid bureaucracy. Highland's procedures give this assurance to staff.

Finding Solutions Outdoors

Other barriers are tougher than perceptual ones. To embed outdoor learning in the curriculum, working with established budgets and staffing will require creativity. Teachers and headteachers have begun to do this: by reprioritising; by devising zero cost activities; by innovative timetabling to reduce disruption; by careful planning to alleviate organising time (processing repeat activities once per year) or uncertain weather (pre-planned visits). Nevertheless, more ambitious schemes such as remote excursions or residential experiences for every pupil are unlikely to be realised until economic conditions improve.



Outdoor Partnerships in the Highlands

The full vision of progressive, quality Outdoor Learning for every child and young person cannot be achieved without the support of the people and organisations which utilise and manage the outdoor environment. There has been considerable national investment to facilitate such Outdoor Learning partnerships and there is an extensive National Network for Outdoor Learning, organised by Education Scotland. The Highland Council is also committed to developing and maintaining outdoor partnerships within the authority itself, with national organisations and with community or commercial enterprises in the Highlands.

Partnership within the local authority

The Highland Council encourages all its services to work in partnership with the ECS Service and with schools locally, to help provide quality outdoor learning experiences for our children and young people. The recent integration of services for children across the authority will help to ensure equal and inclusive delivery of opportunities to all children and young people as well as facilitating personnel working on the health and wellbeing objectives of outdoor learning. Some services, such as Planning and Development, with its Countryside Rangers, have more obvious links with the outdoors than others but personnel from any service may find creative ways to contribute.

Partnership with High Life Highland

High Life Highland, now an arm's length organisation with charitable status, manages assets and staff which were formerly part of Highland Council Community Learning and Leisure. Its services now comprise Adult Learning, Archives, Arts, Community Centres, Leisure, Libraries, Museums, Outdoor Education, Sport and Youth. High Life Highland is therefore a key partner in the delivery of Outdoor Learning. The Highland Council continues to draw upon the functions and expertise of the Outdoor Education service. High Life Highland also retains Youth Development Officers and Active Schools Coordinators, who are directly involved in many outdoor learning initiatives in their Area School Groups.

Partnerships with National Agencies and Organisations

Partnerships greatly extend the opportunities that can be provided for children and young people in Outdoor Learning. Some of those with which we already engage are:

Cairngorms National Park Authority	Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park
Education Scotland	Youth Scotland (Youth Achievement/Dynamic Youth Awards)
Duke of Edinburgh's Award (Scotland)	Scottish Youth Hostel Association (SYHA)
Forestry Commission Scotland	Scottish Environment Protection Agency
Scottish Natural Heritage	UK National Parks
National Trust for Scotland	The Prince's Trust
Grounds for Learning	Eco Schools
Health and Safety Executive (HSE)	Real World Learning Partnership
Institute of Risk Management (IRM)	Royal Highland Education Trust
John Muir Trust and Award	Venture Trust

Recognising Achievement

Significant Awards are also provided by partner organisations to recognise the achievements of young people outdoors. These include Duke of Edinburgh's Award, John Muir Award and both Youth Scotland Awards, as well as new SQA qualifications such as Rural Skills.

Grants for Outdoor Learning Projects

There are also many organisations, which will award grants for Outdoor Learning, such as Scottish Natural Heritage or sportscotland (See *Getting into Scotland's National Parks and National Nature Reserves - resource pack* in the Learning Resources section of the National Park web-site, www.cairngorms.co.uk).

