

Outdoor Education Transforming Children's Lives

Schools (Residential Outdoor Education) (Scotland) Bill – Stage 1 Briefing

Children First is Scotland's national children's charity. We stand up for children, keep them safe and support them to recover from trauma and abuse through our national and local services.

Children First wholeheartedly support the statement made by Liz Smith MSP, that “residential outdoor education, when young people can be away for a week in an environment very far removed from their own, can be life-changing”.

We strongly support the principle that access to this type of experience should be consistently available to children across Scotland, and that legislating for this would be a constructive way to help enable these opportunities for all children.

Key Messages

1. Residential Outdoor Education can be transformative for children and young people. We have seen through our work that it can change lives, by building confidence and communication skills, introducing children to experiences that benefit their mental and physical health and creating a chance to build relationships and connection with others.
2. We are concerned that residential outdoor education will become something that is only available to a privileged few, without targeted support for children who face additional barriers including mental ill health and poverty.
3. It is possible for children facing additional barriers to be supported to access outdoor education, and in fact this is often where we see the most transformative impact. Families tell us it has been “game-changing”.

Bide Oot

Children First have delivered a programme of supported outdoor education experiences for the children and families we support, through a service called ‘Bide Oot’, delivered in partnership with the Ardroy Outdoor Education Centre.

While the programme has now drawn to a close due to a lack of funding, we supported 28 residential, with 135 families including 179 adults and 232 children. Through this, we have seen the transformative impact outdoor education can have.

Many of the children and families we have supported through Bide Oot have told us that they would not have been able to take part in these experiences without the additional support. One young person told us: “I wouldn’t have done outdoor things like that before Bide Oot”.

Evidence gathered through this programme shows that residential outdoor education can be the catalyst for lifelong positive impacts, changing the way children engage with school, their community networks and the support systems around them. Children tell us the experience gave them the tools they needed to be able to go on to university or travel abroad. Families have told us that it has stabilised kinship care placements, giving children and carers the chance to make those arrangements work and avoid the need for further care.

We strongly support the core intention of the Bill. We do believe that more consideration needs to be given to ways in which children who face additional barriers can be supported, so that access is guaranteed for children regardless.

Barriers to children’s access

Child poverty rates are stubbornly high, and pupils living in the 20% most deprived areas have a higher non-attendance rate, and the deprivation gap gets worse in secondary schools.¹ Money challenges and poverty can make accessing these trips more difficult, particularly when families need to pay for travel, clothes or equipment.

Financial challenges are not the only barrier, as children experiencing mental ill health, emotional distress, neurodiversity, struggling with their behaviour or attendance at school may be unable to attend through mainstream offers made through school.

The number of children reaching for mental health support continues to rise, while the cost-of-living crisis continues to have a direct impact on children’s ability to engage in clubs and sports. Research found that in 2023 over 235,000 parents/carers were forced to cut back on hobbies for their children as a result of the cost-of-living crisis.²

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child is clear that children have a right to good physical and mental health and a right to play, but we know that this remains out of reach for too many.

An Inclusive Approach

The young people we have supported were experiencing a range of challenges, including poverty, recovery from addiction, mental health issues, neurodiversity, risk of exclusion from school or families at risk of separation, in amongst many others. The programme has modelled how residential outdoor education can be inclusive.

¹ [Attendance and absence - Summary statistics for schools in Scotland 2023 - gov.scot \(www.gov.scot\)](https://www.gov.scot/publications/attendance-and-absence-2023/pages/summary-statistics-for-schools-in-scotland-2023.aspx).

² [CAS: Children face cutbacks on clothes and hobbies due to soaring bills | Scottish Housing News](https://www.scottishhousingnews.com/news/cas-children-face-cutbacks-on-clothes-and-hobbies-due-to-soaring-bills/)

We followed a three-part structure, which includes time spent planning, collaborating and building a relationship with the people who will take part in the residential, followed by the trip away, then opportunities to re-connect afterwards. Costs and travel are covered, and support is provided to help families invest in clothes and equipment, which they are then able to keep.

We believe that a model like Bide Oot could complement and support school-based offers of residential outdoor education nationally, and that this Bill could be an important base to build from, if a holistic approach is taken.

The “Game-Changing” Impact of residential outdoor education

We strongly believe that supported experiences of residential outdoor education should not be seen as a luxury. We have seen it change lives, by building confidence and communication skills, introducing children to experiences that benefit their mental and physical health and creating a chance to build relationships and connection with others. Families told us it has been “game-changing”.

These benefits lasted over time, helping families stay connected with their community and friendship networks.

- Bide Oot allowed families to re-engage in networks, providing them with the skills and confidence needed to try new hobbies or make new friends. Families spoke about children joining in more at school.
- It also helped families connect to practical support. For example, a local hub worker learned of a parent’s confusion about accessing financial support through lengthy conversations at the residential weekend. After the trip, they worked with the family to help them secure the additional benefits and grants they were entitled to.
- Another worker, who was supporting a young person at risk of exclusion from school, helped to change the school’s perception of the pupil’s capacity to learn by citing examples of the pupil’s positive participation at the Bide Oot residential weekend. The school found different ways to engage this young person, who later secured an accredited apprenticeship in a role with an outdoors focus.

Our evaluation of the Bide Oot work showed the importance of an active lifestyle and spending time outdoors for mental health. One local hub worker told us:

“One young person got up at half six in the morning to go for a run with me, and that just would never normally happen... he’s actively spoken about that since, he’s doing more exercise for his physical health, but also for his mental health as well, and that’s kind of where it all started from as well I suppose... That weekend, they’d see little things that they thought, ‘oh that would actually make a bit of a difference in my life on a day-to-day

basis at home', so they've taken that forward, it's not just a weekend where they just do activities, and it stays there, it continues."

This is consistent with recent research, such as a study by the Mental Health Foundation, which shows that time in nature can significantly reduce symptoms of depression and anxiety.³ Engaging with nature improves mood, reduces feelings of stress or anger, and can help people relax and recharge.⁴

Long term funding

Despite efforts to continue the Bide Oot, after three brilliant years supporting families from across Children First's services this programme concluded in March this year due to a lack of funding.

This work supported families to create incredible and lasting memories together which have had a demonstrable impact on their confidence, emotional wellbeing and relationships. This helped us to gain valuable learning about how enjoying outdoor activities and adventures can strengthen and support family relationships and improve their mental health, which we will seek to integrate into our local whole family support services.

We know that current sources of funding, including local authorities and the third sector, are under immense pressure and the reality is that many of the existing funding routes will not be continued.

We hope that this will be helpful to MSPs as they reflect on this potential new legislation.

Residential outdoor education will become something that is only available to a privileged few. This legislation is an opportunity to find solutions to help ensure that does not happen.

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³ <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/sites/default/files/2022-06/MHAW21-Nature-research-report.pdf>

⁴ <https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/tips-for-everyday-living/nature-and-mental-health/how-nature-benefits-mental-health/>