

# Outdoor Education Centres Fit for the Future

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THE EDUCATIONAL VALUE OF SCOTLAND'S  
OUTDOOR EDUCATION CENTRES (AUGUST 2020)



This document was commissioned by the Scottish Government and developed by the Scottish Advisory Panel for Outdoor Education (SAPOE) in partnership with other relevant organisations.



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*“We learn throughout our lives and find knowledge in varied and sometimes surprising places. Through learning we grow as individuals and as a nation, and as such we must recognise and support excellence in teaching, research and innovation for all learners in all educational contexts”.<sup>1</sup>*

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Outdoor education has a role to play in each and every school community; for each and every pupil; and across the breadth of Scotland’s Curriculum. This guidance, endorsed by Scottish Government, is aimed at head teachers, teaching professionals and other practitioners in schools. Some schools have a long experience in working with Outdoor Education Centres (OEC); others have less experience in doing so. The guidance provides an overview of the benefits of outdoor education, its potential role in COVID-19 education recovery and a starting point for schools to re-engage and work with OEC across Scotland.

It is offered as introductory professional learning, highlighting evidence and sharing the impact and relevance of OEC experiences on learners and their attainment. It is intended to empower leaders of learning, and inform the learning decisions made in collaboration with staff, parents, pupils and OEC partnerships as they design their recovery curriculum and beyond. It recognises that outdoor learning comprises a continuum of experiences including learning outdoors in school grounds, in the wider community and via outdoor education centres. It highlights and supports the unique and impactful contribution to Scotland’s education curriculum that is provided by OEC experiences.

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<sup>1</sup> National Performance Framework, National Outcome for Education.

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*“Learning Away has shown that a residential learning experience provides opportunities and benefits/impacts that cannot be achieved in any other educational context or setting”<sup>2</sup>.*

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Outdoor Education Centres have been part of the DNA of Scottish Education for 75 years. Adventurous education in Scotland’s special rural places is unique in a young person’s journey through school in that these learning experiences are beyond the competence and capability of schools alone. Education which is so highly valued that parents pay, and teachers give willingly beyond working time agreements, to ensure ‘this positive right of passage’<sup>3</sup> continues.

Whilst many parents and carers remember enthusiastically their own OEC visits, some will now be anxious about safety in the context of COVID-19; this guidance provides assurance about the educational and wellbeing benefits of OEC’s and our further guidance [COVID-19 Reopening of OEC](#) identifies appropriate OEC safety standards comparable with school health protection expectations.

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*“Studies of adventure learning interventions consistently show positive benefits on academic learning. On average, pupils make approximately four additional months’ progress.” The Education Endowment Foundation<sup>9</sup>*

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<sup>2</sup> Learning Away Final Evaluation Report, York Consulting 2015

<sup>3</sup> White, W., SAPOE Outdoor Education Centre COVID19 recovery, Teacher survey data summary 2020

## Impact on educational equity and excellence

In *Curriculum for Excellence through Outdoor Learning, 2010* Scottish Government emphasised that the outdoor environment offers motivating, exciting, different, relevant and easily accessible contexts for learning and advocates this is best delivered through a combination of school-based outdoor learning and residential programmes and outlined the vision:

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*‘All children and young people are participating in a range of progressive and creative outdoor learning experiences which are clearly part of the curriculum’<sup>4</sup>.*

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The implementation of *Curriculum for Excellence* has stimulated development and growth in outdoor learning and residential, especially for schools in deprived areas.<sup>5</sup> The average time spent on residential outdoor learning has more than doubled between 2006 and 2014<sup>6</sup>.

School inspection reports between 2011 and 2018 identified that a third of secondary schools had highlighted a pupil residential experience, whilst only a quarter of primary schools and special schools did this. In addition, the number of secondary school inspection reports that highlighted residential experience decreases as the percentage of free school meals increases<sup>7</sup> despite Waite<sup>8</sup> and others<sup>9</sup> suggestion that the educational value of outdoor residential experiences seems ‘significantly greater for ‘vulnerable’ pupils. The Education Endowment Foundation concurs “evidence suggests that the impact is greater for more vulnerable students and older learners (teenagers), longer courses (more than a week), and those in a ‘wilderness’ setting.”<sup>10</sup> It is important to note, however, that inspection evidence would only be indicative as school visits to outdoor education centres would not be mentioned routinely in inspection reports.

*To what extent is your OEC program embedded in progressive outdoor learning experiences?*

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*“Young people benefit from residential educational experiences and have achieved success in challenging outdoor activities” HMIE Inspection Report 2018*

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<sup>4</sup> Scottish Government, *Curriculum for Excellence through Outdoor Learning, 2010*. <https://education.gov.scot/nih/Documents/hwb24-cfe-through-outdoor-learning.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Davies, R. (2018) *Residential Outdoor Education in Scotland: change over time and the impacts of socio-economic deprivation on access*. University of Stirling

<sup>6</sup> Mannion, G., Mattu, L. and Wilson, M. (2015) *Teaching, learning, and play in the outdoors: a survey of school and pre-school provision in Scotland*. Scottish Natural Heritage Commissioned Report No. 779.

<sup>7</sup> Beames, S., Polack, N., (2019) *School inspection reports and the status of outdoor learning, residential experiences and adventurous activities in Scottish schools*

<sup>8</sup> Fuller, C. (2016) *Making gains: the impact of outdoor residential experiences on students’ examination grades and self-efficacy*

<sup>9</sup> Dudman, J., Hedges, C., Loynes, C. (2019) *The impact of residential experiences on pupil progress and attainment in year six (10 – 11 year olds) in England*

<sup>10</sup> Education Endowment Foundation (2018) *Outdoor adventure learning Teaching & Learning Toolkit*



## Impact on progression within curriculum areas

An extensive 5-year study of 11 to 14 year-olds from 849 schools, attending mixed curriculum-adventure residential courses with fieldwork providers across the UK revealed that students from socially deprived backgrounds benefitted from exposure to learning environments which promoted authentic practical inquiry; students' collaborative skills improved and interpersonal relationships were strengthened and taken back to school.<sup>11</sup>

*To what extent do you collaborate with professional partners around outcomes rather than programme? Where is pupil voice in this?*

Further, when residential experiences explicitly addressed curriculum content, in this case of creative writing and geography, the evidence gathered from 10 to 11 year-olds' test results ascertain residential experiences can impact significantly on progression and attainment<sup>12</sup>.

Research evidence shows that outdoor residential experiences can improve attainment and exam results. A three year outdoor residential project with 14 to 16 year-old pupils found just that; the impact of these visits had been significant in terms of students' sense of confidence and efficacy and had a statistically significant impact on formal examination results in school<sup>13</sup>. Confirmed again on 2019 Scottish geography and biology Field Studies courses "the exceptional improvement in score for the experimental group relative to the control group is consistent with research showing that residential courses wholly or partly dedicated to curriculum work deliver strong cognitive gain"<sup>14</sup>.

The Calderglen Learning Away partnership set out to use their residential programme to raise the aspirations of more students to go to universities, and for those universities to be beyond Glasgow. 61% of students who attended their Drama residential achieved higher than their predicted grade, compared to 21% who did not attend. Teachers reported the impact of residentials on achievement in school as: improved confidence and motivation, students having a better awareness of their strengths and weaknesses and knowing what to do to improve, increased progress in learning, a more collaborative approach to learning. Through a range of adventurous, subject-based and revision residentials, and leadership roles on both trips and in school, their university application rate rose and the geographic range of applications spread.<sup>15</sup>

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*"The sense of being 'in it together' and mutual encouragement went a long way towards supporting weaker performances and producing a higher attainment for some of the less confident or able candidates. This was something which could almost certainly not have been generated in a school setting." Calderglen teacher*

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<sup>11</sup> Amos, R., Reiss, M., (2012) The Benefits of Residential Fieldwork for School Science: Insights from a five-year initiative for inner-city students in the UK, International Journal of Science Education

<sup>12</sup> Dudman, J., Hedges, C., Loynes, C. (2019) The impact of residential experiences on pupil progress and attainment in year six (10 – 11 year olds) in England <http://learningaway.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Learning-Away-Comparative-Research>

<sup>13</sup> Fuller, C., Powell, D., Fox, S., (2016) Making gains: the impact of outdoor residential experiences on students' examination grades and self-efficacy, Educational Review

<sup>14</sup> Scrutton, R., (2019) Investigating the process of learning for school pupils on residential outdoor education courses

<sup>15</sup> Kendall, S., Rodger, J., (2015) Evaluation of Learning Away: Final Report

## Impact on personal and social development

Experience of the outdoors and wild adventure space has the potential to confer a wide range of benefits on young people<sup>16</sup>.

Argyll and Bute Council's 5 day Outward Bound experience of 107 pupils found:

- 93% felt more confident that they could overcome challenges
- 86% felt better able to keep going when they face difficulties in the future
- 85% were more aware of the strengths they need to develop
- 81% felt more confident in their ability to reach the goals they set themselves.<sup>17</sup>

A systematic review is a study of studies, a structured investigation to critically appraise and synthesise all the relevant primary research on a topic. Finnes et al identified 15 systematic reviews of the effects of UK outdoor learning on people aged 5 to 25 years, published since 2003. They provide extensive evidence of the consistent positive effects of outdoor learning. They conclude almost all report that the various outdoor learning activities have positive effects on all their various outcomes, e.g., attitudes, beliefs, interpersonal and social skills, academic skills, positive behaviour, re-offending rates and self-image<sup>18</sup>.

Action research involving 60 schools across the UK from 2009 to 2015, identified that school residential impact positively: on relationships; on resilience, self-confidence and wellbeing; on engagement with learning; on achievement; on knowledge, understanding and skills; on cohesion; on student leadership, co-design and facilitation of learning; on transition and on pedagogical skills.<sup>19</sup>

These broad developmental benefits of OECs mirror some of the traits identified by over three-quarters of teachers consulted on the negative consequence of lockdown and COVID-19 on young people; their mental and physical health, confidence, team working skills, resilience, communication skills and personal development.<sup>20</sup>

The much anticipated return to OEC is a return to a highly effective extension of the school estate; providing extended time, space and intimacy to explore personal, social and wellbeing deficiencies and rebuild relationships and school communities. 85% of teachers consulted thought their school will do at least the same or more residential outdoor learning after the pandemic is over<sup>21</sup>. Outdoor settings where evidence<sup>22</sup> points to better health outcomes both mentally and physically, will be a high priority<sup>23</sup>.

*How do you and your OEC measure the wellbeing and developmental impacts?*



<sup>16</sup> Thompson, W., et al (2006) Free-range Teenagers: the role of wild adventure space in young people's lives.

<sup>17</sup> The Outward Bound Trust partnership report 2019-20

<sup>18</sup> Fiennes, C., et al (2015) The Existing Evidence-Base about the Effectiveness of Outdoor Learning

<sup>19</sup> Kendall, S., Rodger, J., (2015) Evaluation of Learning Away: Final Report

<sup>20</sup> White, W., SAPOE Outdoor Education Centre COVID19 recovery, Teacher survey data summary 2020

<sup>21</sup> White, W., SAPOE Outdoor Education Centre COVID19 recovery, Teacher survey data summary 2020

<sup>22</sup> Faculty of Public Health and Natural England (2010) Great Outdoors: How our natural health service uses green space to improve well being

<sup>23</sup> White, M., et al (2019) Spending at least 120 minutes a week in nature is associated with good health and wellbeing. Scientific Reports.

## Impact on professional multiplicity

The COVID-19 pandemic has increased the public health risk of large groups indoors for long periods, resulting in a worldwide focus on outdoor learning. Scottish Government COVID-19 guidance advises outdoor education is one of a range of options that can provide high quality learning and teaching in a positive learning environment, whilst supporting measures to minimise the risk of infection and transmission. Scottish education has an enviable outdoor learning heritage, an “emerging leader” of the last decade<sup>24</sup>. Teaching young people outside, in all weathers throughout the Scottish year is a particular expertise of our OECs. Working alongside these outdoor specialists with different pedagogies expands the professional capabilities and confidence of mainstream teachers to teach outside<sup>25</sup>.

*How does your school OEC experience empower teacher professional learning?*

All twenty three East Ayrshire Council teachers felt more confident teaching outdoor learning, with all reporting an increase in the amount of outdoor learning they were delivering (many from monthly to weekly) after completing the Curriculum Outdoors Attainment Challenge along with their classes<sup>26</sup>.

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*“The benefits from learning from experts in their field is invaluable. The contribution made by instructors to the self-worth individuals feel is invaluable. Often, it is our most vulnerable and less confident children that thrive during these experiences. For some children it is absolutely a once in a lifetime opportunity. Support must be given, our children need it now more than ever”.<sup>27</sup>*

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<sup>24</sup> Education Scotland, Outdoor Learning Practical Guidance, 2012 <https://education.gov.scot/improvement/learning-resources/support-for-professional-development-in-outdoor-learning/>

<sup>25</sup> Natural England (2016) Natural Connections Demonstration Project, 2012-2016: Final Report

<sup>26</sup> White, N., (2019) Curriculum Outdoors Attainment Challenge Impact report on the COACH programme in East Ayrshire Schools.

<sup>27</sup> Quote from SAPOE Teacher OEC Consultation July 2020. [Accessed <https://www.sapoe.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/SAPOE-OEC-Teacher-survey-data-summary-2020.pdf>]

## Impact on connection with nature

In addition to its potential to support education recovery during COVID-19 and its role in supporting pupil wellbeing and attainment, outdoor learning is a key pedagogy in Learning for Sustainability and an entitlement for all learners<sup>28</sup>. This cross-curricular approach to creating coherent, rewarding and transformative learning experiences is about learners, educators, schools and their wider communities building a socially-just, sustainable and equitable society<sup>29</sup>.

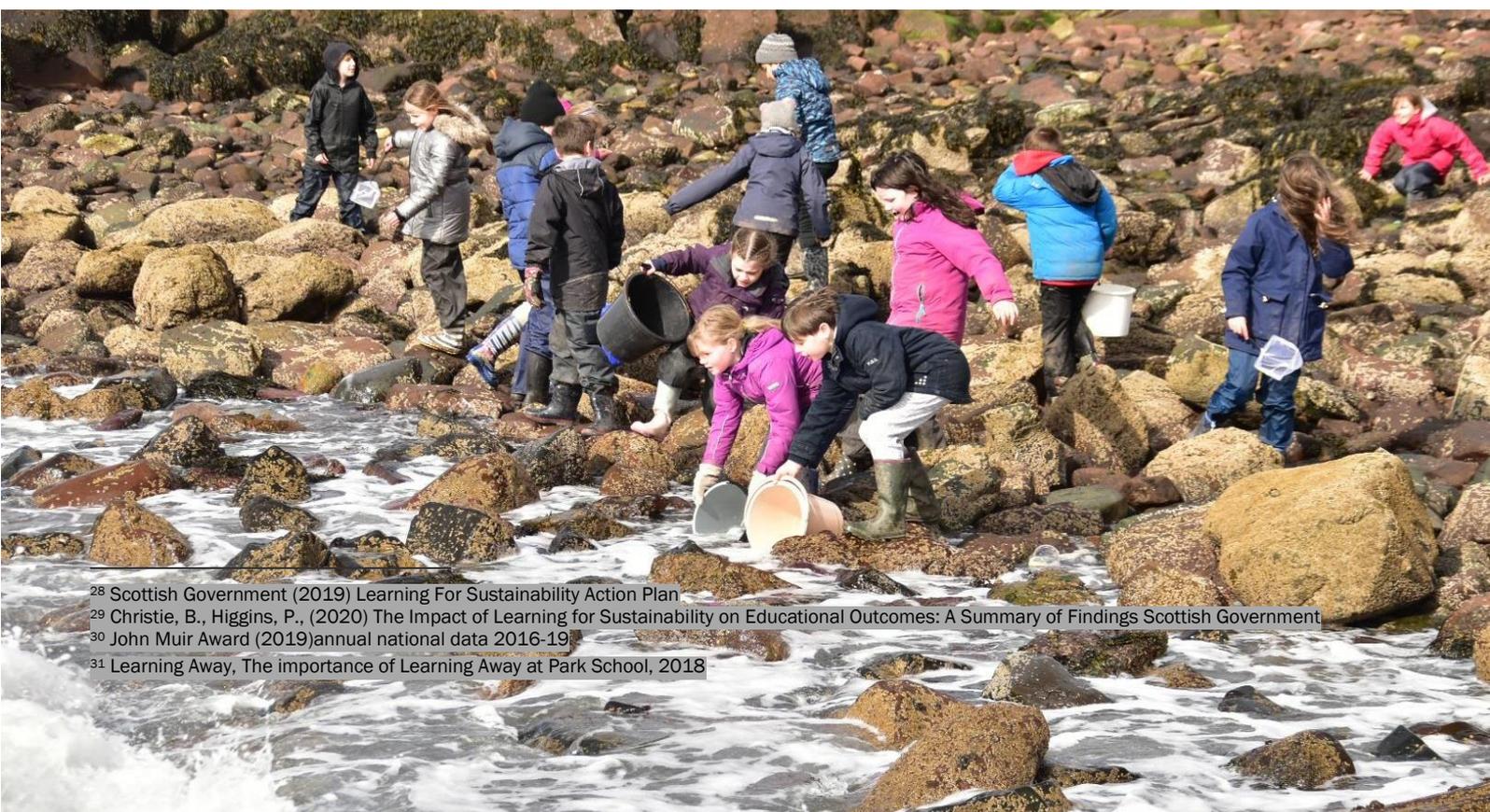
Faced with recovering education, and the rural economy as the climate crisis takes effect, OECs have relevant pedigree and expertise to work in partnership with schools across the curriculum. High quality OEC challenge young people to explore, experience and come to know themselves, their connection to the world around them, and the contributions they can make to community and society whilst fostering emotional connections to nature and environmental stewardship through time spent outdoors; 28% of John Muir Awards earned in Scotland in 2018 were by young people at OEC residential<sup>30</sup>.

*How does your school OEC experience create coherent, cross curricular, transformative learning for sustainability?*

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*The beauty of the residentials we offer is that pupils find a whole new environment they never knew existed. The residential provides a new setting to take on challenges and learn life skills without even realising it. Our residentials relieve stress and anxiety, develop social skills, motivate learning across the curriculum (and beyond) and allow pupils to be practical, responsible and productive members of the community.” Head Teacher Park School<sup>31</sup>*

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<sup>28</sup> Scottish Government (2019) Learning For Sustainability Action Plan

<sup>29</sup> Christie, B., Higgins, P., (2020) The Impact of Learning for Sustainability on Educational Outcomes: A Summary of Findings Scottish Government

<sup>30</sup> John Muir Award (2019) annual national data 2016-19

<sup>31</sup> Learning Away, The importance of Learning Away at Park School, 2018

## Impact in the future

Evidence shows OEC can impact broad learning and life prospects, however like schools, outdoor centres are not homogenous; school leadership, teachers and pupils must co-construct learning with partners for it to have most impact. Strong benefits are associated with well-designed preparatory, and follow-up work<sup>32</sup>. It is important to work with well-trained and well-qualified OEC staff<sup>33</sup> to fully realise these benefits.

Some education authorities maintain effective non-residential OECs, as much of Scotland's 5,000+ bed OEC capacity has now transferred since the '80s from local authority ownership to the private and third sectors; from 70 to 11 local government centres.<sup>34</sup> Although predominantly owned and operated by the third and private sectors, all residential OECs are still heavily dependent on educational budgets and parent's ability and willingness to contribute to visit costs.

Scotland's Outdoor Education Centres are as valuable and relevant an educational experience as ever; schools should consider OEC visits to aid education recovery, the research evidence is substantial. It is essential, to sustain this life changing learning for future generations and to ensure that Scotland continues to be the best place for children to grow up.<sup>35</sup>

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*'Having accompanied my class for the last few years on the yearly outdoor centre residential trip, I have seen first-hand the positive difference it has on children. And, as a teacher who's rapidly approaching retirement, I have very fond memories of my own Primary 7 trip when my teacher took us – these trips have long-term effects!'*<sup>36</sup>

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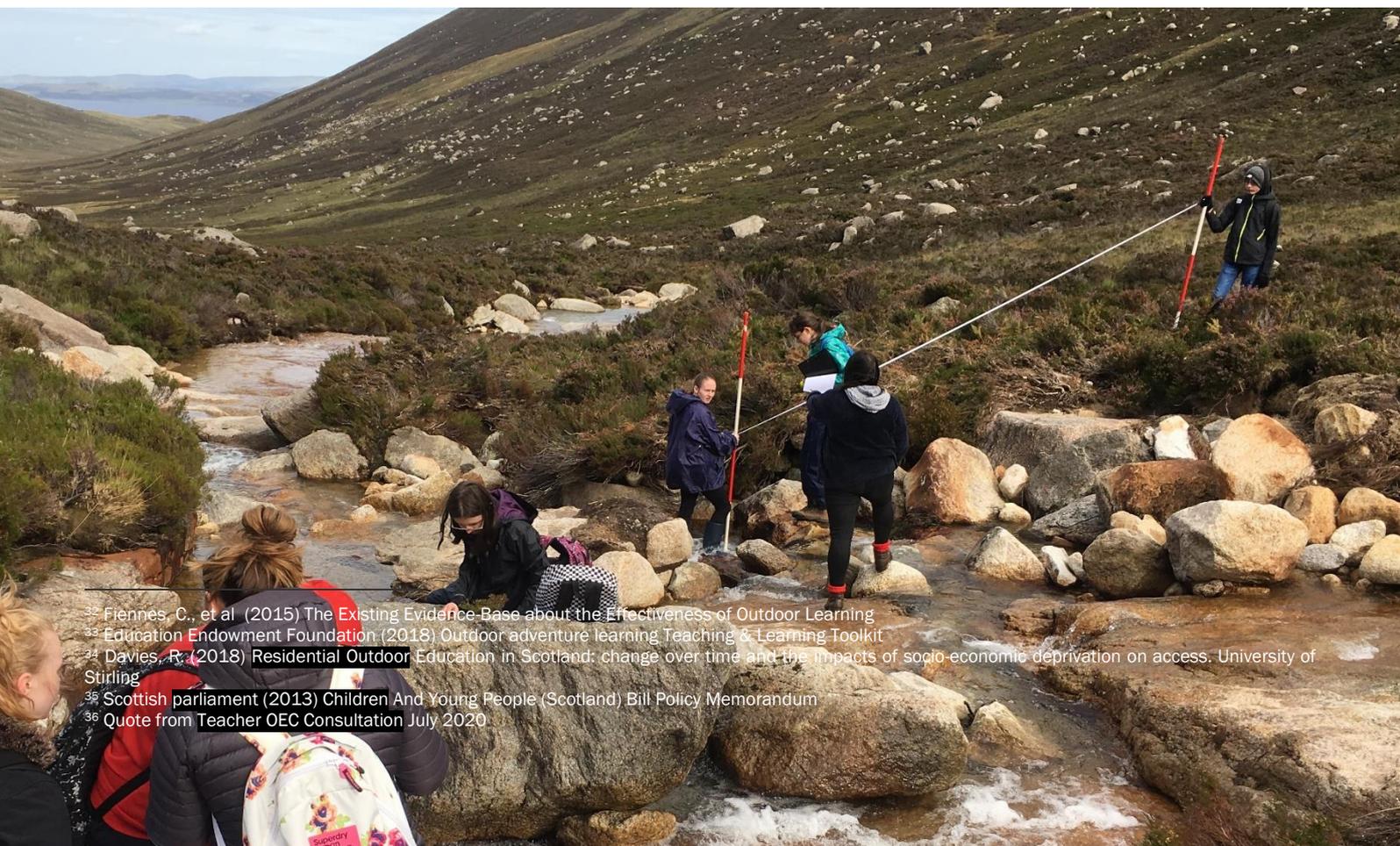
<sup>32</sup> Fiennes, C., et al (2015) The Existing Evidence Base about the Effectiveness of Outdoor Learning

<sup>33</sup> Education Endowment Foundation (2018) Outdoor adventure learning Teaching & Learning Toolkit

<sup>34</sup> Davies, R. (2018) Residential Outdoor Education in Scotland: change over time and the impacts of socio-economic deprivation on access. University of Stirling

<sup>35</sup> Scottish parliament (2013) Children And Young People (Scotland) Bill Policy Memorandum

<sup>36</sup> Quote from Teacher OEC Consultation July 2020



## Further professional learning

To implement education recovery and deliver improved outcomes for young people through outdoor learning and teaching we recommend that school leaders, teachers and others access the following:

- [COVID19 recovery for School OEC visits.](#)
- [Going Out There - Scottish Framework for Safe Practice in Off-site Visits](#)
- Teachers professional learning- [Teaching Learning Outdoors in Scotland course](#), [Brilliant Residentials training](#), [Institute for Outdoor Learning Professional Standard](#).
- OEC staff professional learning- [Supporting Learning Outdoors in Scotland course](#), [Brilliant Residentials training](#), [Institute for Outdoor Learning Professional Standard](#), [AHOEC membership](#)
- [National Improvement Hub- Support for Professional Development in Outdoor Learning](#)
- [Association of Heads of Outdoor Education Centres Scotland High Quality Guide](#)

## Authors

Neil Baird, *Association of Heads of Outdoor Education Centre, Youthlink Scotland & Scout Scotland*  
Andrew Bradshaw, *Scottish Advisory Panel for Outdoor Education & Edinburgh City Council*  
Alex MacFie, *Association of Heads of Outdoor Education Centre & Field Studies Council*  
Willie White, *Group Chair, Scottish Advisory Panel for Outdoor Education & East Ayrshire Council*

## Contributors

Liam Cahill, *Scottish Government Learning Directorate*  
Ian Menzies, *Education Scotland*

**THE SCOTTISH ADVISORY PANEL** is the forum for representatives from Local Authorities across Scotland to consider and debate best practice in the development and safe delivery of Outdoor Learning.

