

Curriculum Improvement Cycle Guidance

May 2025

This paper provides key context for outdoor learning in Scotland’s Curriculum for Excellence (CfE). It is designed to guide SAPOE members in shaping their Local Authority (LA) response to the Curriculum Improvement Cycle (CIC) process, and offers an update on outdoor learning priorities ahead of new national policy being introduced later this year. It will also be shared with curriculum review groups and SAPOE partners as part of the CIC process and policy review.

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PART 1

Background and current context

We welcome the CIC as the first national opportunity to review the relevance of outdoor learning pedagogy across the whole Scottish curriculum since the introduction of CfE in 2007. We wish to see the maximum impact for children and young people, achievable through the widest opportunity to learn outdoors across the whole curriculum at all stages 3-18.

Research from the University of Stirling, funded by the national agencies NatureScot and Education Scotland, indicates that opportunities to learn outdoors throughout Scottish education increased for approximately a decade after the introduction of CfE and has since decreased.

The Education Minister instigated a national programme in 2005-07 to confirm the evidence and broad potential for outdoor learning (OL) across future Scottish education pedagogy. Subsequent Ministers maintained a national OL advisory group and Development Officer role to represent outdoor learning in its broadest form across the writing, implementation and development of the CfE from 2007 to 2017. This national leadership structure corresponded with the decade of increased opportunities to learn outdoors, across all stages.

Recent Scottish policy and resourcing has emphasised and steered outdoor pedagogy towards particular narratives. This saw excellent leadership in outdoor education as a tool for pandemic recovery, Early Years expansion, Learning for Sustainability and residential outdoor education provision. However, this may have failed to realise the broad potential of outdoor learning pedagogy for much of the rest of the curriculum and other educational priorities, for example the Scottish Attainment Challenge, Pupil Equity Fund and health and wellbeing agenda.

This recent prioritisation of outdoor learning towards specific policy remits in no way detracts from the broad ambition for generic benefits across the whole curriculum, as was intended by the original [CfE Through the Outdoors Vision in 2007](#). However, to halt the further decline in opportunities to learn outdoors, it is essential that the CIC is supported and challenged to consider outdoor learning pedagogy across the breadth of curriculum, rather than restricting the narrative to a few policy areas.

To quote the definition in [Taking Learning Outdoors – Partnerships for Excellence](#) (2007):

“...outdoor education is a process in which educators, students and others take part, and outdoor learning is the learning which accrues as a result.

Outdoor education is seen as a teaching approach which can enhance and integrate a broad range of core experiences across the whole curriculum – a wide variety of activities which connect learners with their environment, their community, their society and themselves. It engages and motivates learners through first-hand experiences which demonstrate the relevance of knowledge, understanding and skills, and can help to underpin better attainment and achievement across the curriculum.”

The Scottish Government vision is set out in [Curriculum for Excellence Through Outdoor Learning](#) (2010) as follows:

“Our vision for outdoor learning in Scotland is that:

- 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.”

Since the publication of this vision in 2010, the acknowledgement of the benefits that outdoor learning, as an approach, brings for overall learning by individuals and groups has been revisited, reinforced and strengthened through further guidance:

Early Years

[Realising the Ambition: Being Me](#) (national practice guidance for early years in Scotland)

[Out to Play](#) (practical guidance for creating outdoor play experiences in early learning and childcare)

[Out to Play - Caring for Outdoor Spaces](#)

Primary age learners

[Successful Approaches to Outdoor Learning](#) (Scottish HM Inspectors of Education report 2022)

All age learners 3-18

[Target 2030 - Learning for Sustainability Action Plan](#)

For all children and young people

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) was incorporated into Scottish law in 2024. Article 12 – the Views of Young People and Article 29 – Aims of Education can be particularly addressed in the context of outdoor learning.

None of these guidance documents have changed the fundamental message of the 2007 and 2010 documents. At the same time, it is apparent that continued support to put policy and guidance into practice is essential ([Mannion G et al 2023](#)) if impactful and relevant outdoor learning is to become a reality for all children and young people in Scotland.

PART 2

Curriculum Improvement Cycle and the role of outdoor learning

This document establishes the importance of having a strong outdoor learning policy within the context of the current Curriculum Improvement Cycle being led by Education Scotland.

Why, What, How (and WHERE)

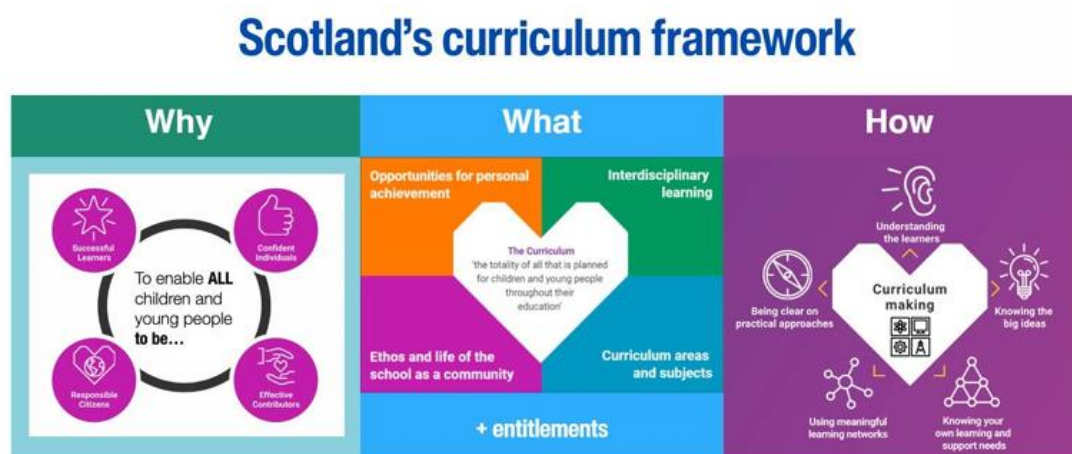


Fig:5.0: Scotland's Curriculum Framework (Education Scotland, 2019a)

The OECD report *Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence: Into the Future* (2021) endorsed the Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) but advised that a focus be placed on its continued development.

Why – the 4 Capacities

Good quality outdoor learning positively impacts development of the four capacities and supports the CfE themes/outcomes: Attainment, Achievement, Health, Environment and Sustainability, Resilience, Creativity, Pro Social Skills and Community Building. It also generally engages young people in learning, particularly those who, for various reasons, struggle in the classroom environment.

What – the 4 Contexts of Learning

Outdoor learning can be woven effectively through the four contexts of learning, curriculum areas and the 4 Cs of Learning for Sustainability to ensure that "every 3-18 place of education becomes a sustainable learning setting".

[Example of outdoor learning in action through the four contexts of learning:](#)

- Curriculum areas and subjects
- Interdisciplinary learning
- Ethos and life of the school as a community
- Opportunities for personal achievement

This will also require consideration of the 4 Cs of LfS and how outdoor learning can support this:

Curriculum - Learning, teaching, assessment, pedagogy
Culture - Learner voice, UNCRC, ethos, relationships

Community - Place, partnerships, families, local action
Campus - Buildings, grounds, transport, energy & water use

How – Curriculum Making

Outdoor learning lends itself well to a progressive approach of experiences through a young person's 3-18 learning journey in terms of place, knowledge, skills and assessment.

“Teachers should be supported to develop curriculum expertise, exploring the curriculum as it currently exists and being able to collaboratively envisage its future.” ([National Framework for LfS in ITE, 2025](#))

This will require a focus on:

- effective learning and teaching approaches
- capacity building and resources
- regular and frequent opportunities and planned progression

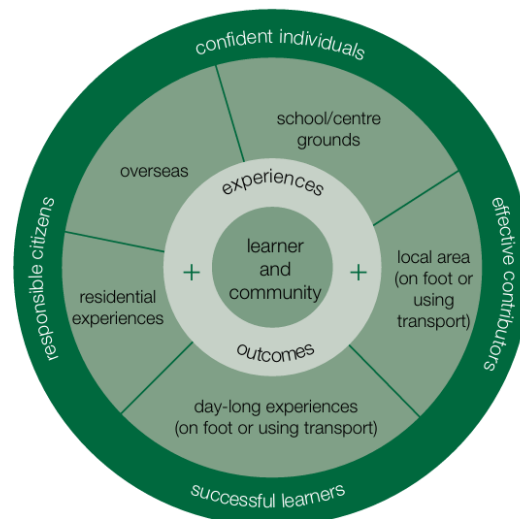
Part 3 of this document makes some further suggestions around these practical areas.

Where

Learning outdoors takes place in a range of settings – from the school grounds to historic grounds, from local parks to national parks, from villages to cities, from residential experiences within Scotland to overseas expeditions. Each outdoor learning opportunity allows children and young people the chance to explore new places and share experiences. Learners may well have ideas for using local areas which may not have been included at the planning stage.

We strongly suggest that the ‘Where’, currently absent from the CIC process, should hold an equal place of importance in Scotland’s Curriculum Framework. Continually considering where learning can best happen and building progression into outdoor learning experiences encourages a culture of learning in the real world and the development of agency and resilience. It adds breadth and depth to learning experiences and engages more young people.

A refreshed version of this graphic from [Curriculum for Excellence Through Outdoor Learning](#) (2010) would emphasise the various spaces and places where learning takes place and how this contributes to a young person’s progressive learning journey.



PART 3

Practical suggestions to embed outdoor learning

SAPOE can support staff and learning settings with resources, advice and training. Most schools now include outdoor learning in their Standards and Quality Improvement Plan (SQIP) and adopting the following steps can help to bring these plans to life.

1. Pedagogy

Outdoor learning pedagogy can simply be defined as “an intentional approach to teaching and learning using the outdoors as a resource.” For detailed information, go to [IOL - About Outdoor Learning](#).

2. Terminology

Another good starting point is to embed terminology that normalises learning in a variety of contexts e.g. learning space not classroom, teacher not classroom teacher, outdoor learning or learning outdoors not outdoor activity. This helps to build a culture that naturally includes learning outdoors.

Outdoor learning can be further embedded in the culture and ethos of an establishment by ensuring it is explicitly included in planning formats. Planning and other collegiate meetings can take place outdoors to reinforce the message that outdoor spaces are learning and teaching spaces.

3. Outdoor learning audit

A great way to support the journey to embedding outdoor learning is for schools and staff to undertake an audit. This audit can identify what outdoor learning is taking place now, what it could look like in one year and the resources are required to achieve that. It will help identify excellent practice in your own learning setting and elsewhere, and help you prioritise resources and approaches to maximise the potential of your outdoor learning delivery.

4. Identify supporting resources

A plethora of resources is available to support outdoor learning, so it is important to select a few that best reflect your context and aims. Consider peer and senior leadership support to develop the following:

- A whole-school approach to embed outdoor learning, including ideas to develop school grounds to support learning outdoors (sample templates are available from SAPOE)
- Background reading such as [Outdoor Learning: Practical Guidance, Ideas and Support](#) and [High Quality Outdoor Learning 2025 - A Guide for All](#)
- Provide handbooks for staff e.g. Dirty Teaching
- Create outdoor learning folders with risk/benefit information, guides for planning local visits and lesson ideas
- Create class backpacks with essential equipment for off-site visits in the local area
- Measure impact – assess, reflect on and enhance your provision through evidence and impact assessment.
- Identify potential partners in your community and Local Authority, as well as at regional and national level.

5. Professional learning

Access to high-quality, relevant Continued Professional Development (CPD) is consistently identified as essential to improve outdoor learning practice and build staff members' confidence to deliver learning outdoors. CPD should be available at all stages from Initial Teacher Education (ITE) and probationary year, and continue with career-long professional learning (CLPL).

We recommend the development of a Professional Learning pathway to ensure that all teaching and support staff have confidence to take learning outdoors. The Early Years sector provides a good example: significant commitment was made to support outdoor learning, which has resulted in improved confidence among staff and opportunities for learning outdoors in nursery settings.

This requirement for ongoing CPD needs to be fully supported by senior management teams in education services, schools and community settings to ensure implementation and opportunity.

- Initial Teacher Education: the new framework for LfS in ITE should endorse a minimum contact time that beginner teachers have with outdoor learning.
- Probationer Courses: all probationers should have the opportunity for further professional development in outdoor learning. This is most successful when built into core training during the probationary year. [SAPOE's online learning courses](#) Supporting Learning Outdoors (SLO) and Teaching Learning Outdoors (TLO) are ideal for this, along with in-person follow-up courses such as fire lighting, how to teach literacy, numeracy outdoors etc.
- Career-long professional development opportunities include SAPOE Lead Teacher and Learning through Landscapes [Practitioner in OL](#).

Other courses that support CLPL include:

- SAPOE's course for Educational Visits Coordinators to support offsite visits
- Outdoor NGB & Local Skills Courses e.g. Lowland Leader, Cycle Training, Fire Lighting etc
- Local examples of Teaching Using ... Courses, Teacher in Residence programmes etc (See also recommendations in Greg Mannion et al, [Teaching Learning and Play in the Outdoors: a survey of provision in 2022](#))

6. Inclusion and equity in outdoor learning

A whole-school, planned approach to embedding outdoor learning will ensure that questions around inclusion and equity are always considered. This will create an enabling approach and allow for necessary adjustments to be made.

7. Partnerships and parent/carer communication

With effective communication, parental and partnership support for learning outdoors in your setting can significantly enhance parental and community engagement. Relationships between staff, learners, parents and wider community groups are wholly positive and mutually beneficial. For a useful resource, see [Whole school and community approach to learning for sustainability \(LfS\) - Self-evaluation and improvement framework](#)

8. Senior leadership support

Support from senior leaders in organisations and individual learning settings is vital to embedding regular and frequent learning outdoors as part of a progressive 3-18 learning journey.

To quote the General Teaching Council for Scotland's Standard for Headship and its Learning for Sustainability strategic action plan:

"[A whole-school approach] is enabled by headteachers establishing and modelling a coherent, progressive and holistic Learning for Sustainability vision and ethos that supports planning across the curriculum, professional learning and collegial practice."

"Leaders engage with partners to provide access to diverse learning opportunities; including outdoor learning and connections with the wider community." SAPOE is available to support leaders with training, resources and advice to realise this vision. Please get in touch to find out how we can help.

PART 4

Recommendations for national initiatives

To realise our vision for outdoor learning across Scotland, SAPOE is making the following recommendations for initiatives at a national level.

1. National guidance and data

- **Consistent adoption of [Going Out There](#).** SAPOE calls for all Local Authorities (LAs) to adopt this national guidance for offsite visits, so that a consistent and proportionate approach to learning away from the normal base may be taken.
- **National data gathering using EVOLVE.** A frequent issue when trying to identify impact and quantity of outdoor learning is the lack of comprehensive data gathered across Scotland. Currently, 14 of 32 LAs in Scotland use EVOLVE. SAPOE recommends that this system is provided as a national resource across all LAs in Scotland. This will provide a consistent approach to planning, approving, recording and monitoring off-site visits supported by Going Out There guidance and will also result in more robust data.

2. National and local leadership

As a priority, Education Scotland should have a recognised lead officer for outdoor learning. Having a lead officer embedded within the Education Scotland structure will mean outdoor learning is considered throughout the evolution of policy and practice and will ensure national systems are in place to lead on the quality and safety of provision.

Every LA and educational establishment should have an influential lead officer for outdoor learning who engages teaching staff in career long professional learning.

3. Pupil qualifications

By celebrating success and wider achievement, learning outdoors provides a choice of pathways of both academic and vocational qualifications. It may be particularly suitable for learners who are not achieving in traditional academic subjects, equipping them with life skills such as first aid, boat driving, map reading, rural skills as well as soft skills including leadership, critical thinking and team working.

4. Routine inspection

School and community inspections should routinely evaluate outdoor learning as part of a well-informed inspection regime – [How Good is Our School 4](#) has significant reference to it. Specifically including its evaluation in the inspection regime will help to highlight its positive impact within the curriculum areas and across community learning.

There is a need for inspectors to understand and evaluate what quality outdoor learning looks like. SAPOE will engage with the inspectorate to support this and can help with training for inspectors. Part of this is the High Quality Residential Outdoor Education framework currently being developed in Scotland. As a priority, Education Scotland should be working with the inspectorate and SAPOE to develop a framework to support inspectors and staff to understand what high quality learning outdoors looks like.

5. Creation of a support network for teachers

We recommend the creation or re-establishment of a support network specifically for teachers currently engaging or keen to engage in outdoor learning. The National Network for Outdoor Learning (NNOL) served this purpose well for several years and could be re-established with a clear focus on practical support for teachers and educators. Other options could involve partnering with Outdoor and Woodland Learning (OWL) networks across Scotland.

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