Northern Ireland Assembly

Research and Information Service
Briefing Paper

Paper 77/25 September 2025 NIAR 181-2025

Outdoor education in NI: impacts and issues

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This paper considers outdoor education in Northern Ireland, the benefits of it and the barriers to it, as well as potential lessons from elsewhere. The paper then outlines some of the key issues that should be addressed if outdoor learning is to be successfully embedded in schools and other settings in Northern Ireland based on lessons from Northern Ireland and elsewhere.

Key Points

- This paper considers the impacts and issues relating to outdoor education in Northern Ireland (NI). The Committee for Education has commissioned this research to investigate the key issues for the hands-on delivery of the curriculum in green space (outdoor education) to every schoolchild in NI at all ages.
- It follows a stakeholder event hosted by the Committee and supported by the Northern Ireland Forest School Association on 19 March 2025. The theme of the event was whether Northern Ireland needs an outdoor education strategy.
- There are many definitions of outdoor learning, which are not necessarily mutually exclusive. The definitions of outdoor education reference the holistic approach to the learning, personal development and well-being of participants in a structured fashion.
- It should also be noted that settings for outdoor education can range from the playground and school estate, to local parks, forest schools and residential outdoor education settings.
- Many benefits of outdoor education have been identified in the literature. These include: improved physical and mental well-being; an improved relationship between children and nature; more inclusive education; enhanced curriculum learning; and enhanced child development.
- Benefits for teachers in terms of confidence and job satisfaction have also been identified.
- The Learning through Landscapes website also identifies a number of barriers to outdoor education and suggests potential solutions:[1]
    - A lack of suitable outdoor space and clothing
    - Fears about risks outside
    - Concerns about meeting curriculum demands
    - Concerns about managing behaviour outside
    - A lack of teacher confidence

[1] 5 barriers to outdoor learning at primary school and how to overcome them accessed 10 September 2025

- The CCEA actively promotes outdoor education at the pre-school and Foundation levels in Northern Ireland, and produced a guide in 2022 to support teachers in this area: Learning Outdoors in Pre-School and Foundation Stage
- A thematic review of outdoor education by the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) identified a number of successes in schools in Northern Ireland in 2021:
    - Creative well-planned responses by leaders to Covid-19 guidance
    - Children's enjoyment and engagement in learning
    - Recognition of the benefits of outdoor learning from staff and leaders particularly in relation to well-being and concentration, including for children with special educational needs
    - Holistic approaches to planning across the pre-school and foundation curriculum
    - Increased outdoor opportunities for children to engage in physical play, develop language and communication skills, make confident choices and decisions about learning and to investigate the natural environment and take responsibility for its care
    - Access to additional funding streams from DE and the EA
- The ETI also found a number of barriers:
    - The lack of staff training in pre-schools and primary schools on children's learning in outdoor environments
    - The lack of consistent approaches to monitoring and evaluating the quality of learning and benefits to children's health and well-being
    - Challenges for schools with no covered areas or suitable clothing for children due to bad weather
    - The need for more use of the outdoors for storytelling, singing and the Arts
    - The lack of suitable outdoor storage for foundation stage classes
- There are a number of organisations already working in outdoor learning in Northern Ireland, including the Northern Ireland Forest School Association (NIFSA), which has, since its inception in 2008, trained and supported over 240 official NIFSA forest schools and facilitates the

teaching of 5,000 pupils every month.[2] Research on the benefits of outdoor education and resources for schools can be found on the NIFSA website. NIFSA also has a dedicated outdoor education site at its forest school in Clandeboye Estate, Bangor.

- This paper also considers aspects of outdoor education in Scotland, Wales, England and the Republic of Ireland. Scotland appears to be the most advanced in terms of outdoor education with a Curriculum for Excellence in Outdoor Education published in 2010 and a National Position Statement on outdoor learning and play published in 2018. The Scottish National Position Statement is grounded in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.[3]

- It then explores a number of issues which may impact any strategy for outdoor education, including: culture and commitment; collaboration and partnership working; funding issues; the NI Curriculum; teacher training and development; inclusive approaches; and the school estate.

[2] Forest Schools in Northern Ireland

[3] Inspiring Scotland Scotland's Outdoor Play and Learning National Position Statement (2018)

Contents

1 Introduction

This paper considers the impacts and issues relating to outdoor education in Northern Ireland. The Committee for Education has commissioned this research to investigate the key issues for the hands-on delivery of the curriculum in green space (outdoor education) to every schoolchild in NI at all ages. It follows a stakeholder event hosted by the Committee and supported by the Northern Ireland Forest School Association on 19 March 2025. The theme of the event was whether Northern Ireland needs an outdoor education strategy:

"Is an outdoor education in schools' strategy one of the solutions we need to help every pupil deal with technology, sedentarism, school anxiety and stress – especially for pupils with special educational and mental health needs?"

Presenters at the event outlined the benefits of outdoor education, examples of outdoor education practice in Northern Ireland and good practice from further afield, notably from Scotland. Several of these sources (as is common in the current literature) highlighted the particular importance of outdoor education for children and young people in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic and associated lockdowns.

1.1 What is outdoor learning or education?

There are many definitions of outdoor learning, which are not necessarily mutually exclusive. The Institute of Outdoor Learning provides the following explanation:

"Outdoor learning is an umbrella term for actively inclusive facilitated approaches that predominantly use activities and experiences in the outdoors which lead to learning, increased health and wellbeing and environmental awareness" [4]

While the English Outdoor Council highlights the breadth of potential activities which, in its view, fall under the umbrella of outdoor learning:

[4] Institute of Outdoor Learning High Quality Outdoor Learning for Policy and Decision-makers (2025)

"Outdoor Learning is a broad term that includes: outdoor play in the early years, school grounds projects, environmental education, recreational and adventure activities, personal and social development programmes, expeditions, team building, leadership training, management development, education for sustainability, adventure therapy … and more. Outdoor Learning does not have a clearly defined boundary but it does have a common core…" [5]. This core includes:

- All forms of Outdoor Learning value direct experience
- Outdoor Learning is active learning in the outdoors
- Outdoor Learning is real learning
- Outdoor Learning broadens horizons and stimulates new interest
- Outdoor Learning is becoming more integrated [across different provider types]

According to Learning through Landscapes, there is a focus on a "planned and purposeful approach", which is also implicit, to a greater or lesser degree in the above definitions:

"*Outdoor learning in education is a planned and purposeful approach that uses activities and resources to enhance learning, mental health and wellbeing, and environmental awareness. It can be done both on-site (within school grounds) or off-site (such as on school trips). It offers a stimulating and engaging approach to learning*..."[6]

While UK Youth states:

"We define outdoor learning as experiential learning within an outdoor environment to support a young person's personal, social, and educational development, improve health and wellbeing, physical literacy, and develop

[5] English Outdoor Council: What is Outdoor Learning? accessed 10 September 2025

[6] 5 key benefits of outdoor learning accessed 10 September 2025

environmental awareness. The outdoor space in which learning takes place is an integral part of the learning process."[7]

The definitions of outdoor education therefore reference the holistic approach to the learning, personal development and well-being of participants in a structured fashion. It should also be noted that settings for outdoor education can range from the playground and school estate, to local parks, forest schools and residential outdoor education settings.

Indeed, the UK Youth organisation has stated that the complex and varying terminology around outdoor education causes problems in itself:

"Increasing the understanding of what outdoor learning consists of, and its value to young people, would prompt significant benefits to both the general public and policy makers. For young people and youth workers to identify their activity as fitting into the outdoor learning space could help increase acknowledgement of the need, and drive support for increasing provision to more young people, as current awareness of outdoor learning in mainstream youth work is lower than it could be."[8]

The remainder of this paper considers:

- The benefits of, and barriers to, outdoor education
- Existing approaches to outdoor education in Northern Ireland
- Examples of good practice from elsewhere
- Issues relating to outdoor education in Northern Ireland
- Conclusions

2 The benefits of, and barriers to, outdoor education

There has been increasing awareness of the importance and value of outdoor education, particularly since Covid-19 and the associated lockdowns. Numerous studies have classified the potential benefits of outdoor learning in different

[7] UK Youth Outdoor Learning Policy Report (2023)

[8] As above

ways. These include the Learning Through Landscapes (LTL) website[9] which identifies five key benefits for children:

1. Improved physical and mental well-being, helping to combat what has been described as “Nature Deficit Disorder”
2. Improved relationship between children and nature
3. More inclusive education – according to LTL, “all children are unique – they learn in different ways and for some, these can actually be stifled by the classroom. Especially for children with special educational needs, the classroom can bring with it added stress and ingrained feelings of academic or social ‘difference’.
4. Enhanced curriculum learning: “this shift in environment (and a practical approach) can actually help certain concepts come alive and be easier to understand”[10]
5. Enhanced child development: “by moving away from regimented seating plans and standard classroom-based learning, children can embrace a greater sense of freedom and independence: essential contributors to their development. Research has even suggested that outdoor learning boosts confidence, social skills, communication, motivation, physical skills, knowledge and understanding. It has also been found to boost children’s self-esteem, self-confidence, ability to work cooperatively and positive attitude to learning”.

A recent blog produced by the Assembly’s Research and Information Service (RaISe) states that “Engagement with the natural world positively affects children’s physical and mental wellbeing. Without regular interaction with nature, children are less healthy and miss the chance to develop a deep connection to the environment, which is essential for nurturing future environmental stewards.”[11]

[9] 5 key benefits of outdoor learning accessed 10 September 2025

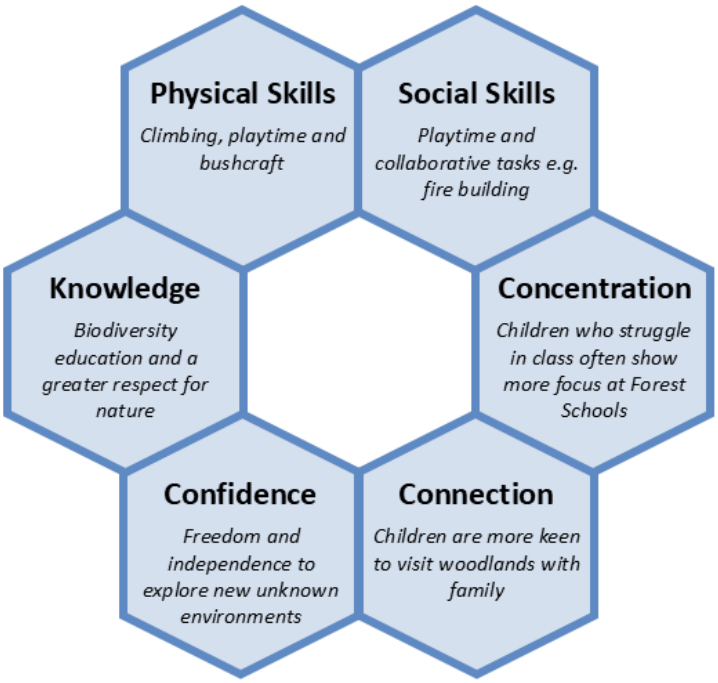
[10] As above

[11] A. Holmes Forest Schools: inside nature’s classroom - Research Matters (25 November 2024)

This blog also highlighted the need to counteract the pervasive use of mobile phones and other technology by children and young people:

"One particular concern is the increase in screen time, increasing 52% since the pandemic,[12] meaning that children are spending twice as much time looking at screens than out in nature. This is a problem as childhood obesity[13] [while falling] *and [problems with] mental health… remain high*[14]*."*

Focusing particularly on Forest Schools, the blog author characterises the benefits of outdoor education as follows:



[12] Stronger guidance and controls needed to protect children from screen time, Education Committee finds - Committees - UK Parliament (25 May 2024)

[13] Obesity among children leaving primary school falls for third year in a row *Irish News*, 5 November 2024

[14] Wadman, R., Taylor, O., Qualter, P., Humphrey, N., Wood, M. L. et al. (2024) A country that works for all children and young people: Improving mental health and wellbeing with and through education settings

Other studies, such as the Natural Connections Project described in more detail below, highlight wider benefits such as increased teacher job satisfaction and longer-term benefits such as, potentially, a greater interest in "green jobs".

The Children and Nature Network highlights the concept of udeskole in Scandinavia:[15]

"The Scandinavian concept of udeskole (meaning "outdoor school") has been described in a Norwegian context by Jordet, in a Swedish context by Dahlgren and Szczepanski and in a Danish context by Mygind. Udeskole targets children aged 7-16, and is characterized by compulsory educational activities outside of school on a regular basis, e.g. one day weekly or fortnightly."

The Network cites research in Norway, Denmark and Sweden that shows, variously, increased physical activity and improved well-being and "social relations and joy" for pupils and reduced stress for teachers as a result of outdoors education.

Further, research by Nature England suggests that the forecast Social Return on Investment (SROI) for learning outside the classroom in the natural environment is £4.32 for every £1 invested.[16]

2.1 Barriers to outdoor learning

The RaISe blog cited above highlighted the persistent problem of limited access to nature:[17]

"Despite the commonly understood benefits of time spent outdoors, many children in the UK have increasingly limited access to nature. Studies

[15] UDESKOLE IN SCANDINAVIA: Teaching and Learning in Natural Places | Children & Nature Network accessed 24 September 2025

[16] Social Value Business 2022. Social & economic benefits of learning in natural environments: A study of learning outside the classroom in natural environments (LINE) in primary school settings to provide a forecast of social value. NECR442. Natural England

[17] A. Holmes Forest Schools: Inside Nature's Classroom 25 November 2024

in England[18] *and Scotland*[19] *found that children today spend less time outdoors than previous generations, often due to urban living, fear of peers,*[20] *increased screen time,*[21] *and parental concerns over safety".*

The research literature highlights a number of barriers to outdoor learning. A recent article, for example, on the experience of outdoor educators in Ireland highlights the systemic barriers to outdoor learning:

"A recent study of elementary teachers in Canada (Oberle et al., 2021) regarding the barriers and support factors for outdoor learning found that the dominant theme inhibiting outdoor learning pedagogy was systemic factors within the education system to do with leadership support, time, curriculum, policy and resourcing".[22]

Other research suggests that teacher confidence is an issue. For example, an Outdoor Learning Briefing Paper by the University of Glasgow suggests that:[23]

"For many teachers, transferring their classroom lessons to the outdoor context will be a massive change, particularly for more established teachers, with some evidence suggesting staff finding natural environments difficult to use or to prepare lessons in advance for, with some suggesting that more commercial space (i.e. swing parks) were easily to adapt to (Elliot and Davis, 2008, Richson et al, 2004). Elliot and Davis (2008) described this attitude as having the power to hinder implementation of outdoor learning".

This lack of confidence is attributed in part to a lack of professional qualifications in outdoor education and inconsistent coverage of outdoor

[18] ONS The Children's People and Nature Survey for England: Summer Holidays 2021 (24 February 2022)

[19] University of Sterling Primary school children spend less time outdoors, University study finds 3 April 2023

[20] Brockman et al.: Children's active play: self-reported motivators, barriers and facilitators. BMC Public Health 2011 11:461

[21] Prothero, A. Kids' Screen Time Rose During the Pandemic and Stayed High. That's a Problem (EducationWeek, 28 February 2023)

[22] Orla Kelly, Joan Whelan & Maura Coulter (15 Mar 2025): A pedagogy of outdoor learning in the primary school – Insights from outdoor educators in Ireland, Journal of Adventure Education and Outdoor Learning, DOI: 10.1080/14729679.2025.2477982

[23] University of Glasgow Outdoor Learning Briefing Paper (June 2020)

learning in Initial Teacher Training. It is also highlighted as an issue in a research report about outdoor education in Wales which, in its literature review, states:

"To achieve the level of outdoor learning that really benefits children, teachers need to be really skilled at implementing outdoor learning as a pedagogy. This requires professional development and practitioners' willingness to embrace this form of educational development (Maynard et al., 2011)." [24]

This paper also identified parental attitudes as a potential barrier:

"Parents may show anxiety around unsupervised outdoor play (Giddings and Yarwood, 2005, Groves and McNish, 2009), or may have limited knowledge or exposure to outdoor activities which may influence child's attitudes towards extended periods outdoors (Gaster, 1991)."

The Learning through Landscapes website also identifies a number of risks and suggests potential solutions:[25]

- A lack of suitable outdoor space and clothing
- Fears about risks outside
- Concerns about meeting curriculum demands
- Concerns about managing behaviour outside
- A lack of teacher confidence

For UK Youth, in a report produced for the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Outdoor Learning, funding is a key barrier:

"Outdoor learning is currently funded through a very mixed funding model that comprises family payments, school budgets, local authority grants, bursaries funded by charitable foundations, statutory grants, and commercial activities that subsidise charitable activity. Not all young people have access to all of these funding streams.

[24] Education Wales Teaching and learning in the outdoors: the current state of outdoor learning in schools in Wales (2023)

[25] 5 barriers to outdoor learning at primary school and how to overcome them accessed 10 September 2025

Many organisations in the outdoor learning sector are commercial, and therefore have priorities and responsibilities associated with ensuring sufficient income, that leads to knock on impacts for participants. Limited resources, across financial, physical, capacity and time, create the most impenetrable barriers to engagement from young people in outdoor learning (Youth Link Scotland & John Muir webinar, 2020). The particular issue of cost and funding has been frequently identified and highlighted as a barrier preventing young people from benefitting fully from outdoor learning".[26]

UK Youth also highlighted in this report that children and young people from lower income backgrounds and from certain demographic backgrounds (particularly from certain ethnic minority or those with disabilities) can experience barriers in relation to access to green spaces, transport and any equipment or clothing required.

3 Existing approaches to outdoor education in NI

3.1 The Northern Ireland Curriculum

The CCEA actively promotes outdoor education at the pre-school and Foundation levels, and produced a guide in 2022 to support teachers in this area: Learning Outdoors in Pre-School and Foundation Stage. In the guide, the CCEA states:

"*The outdoor play area is one of the best possible learning environments… It should be supported by adults who know the intended learning and are engaged with the children, so that the children experience joy and excitement as they learn new skills and make fresh discoveries. Outdoor learning environments can promote children's curiosity, exploration, creativity and critical skills, as well as independence and imaginative play."*[27]

The guide also suggests outdoor learning activities under the six areas of leaning in the curriculum for this Stage i.e.: The Arts; Language and Literacy;

[26] UK Youth Outdoor Learning Policy Report (2023)

[27] CCEA Learning Outdoors in Pre-School and Foundation Stage (2022)

Mathematics and Numeracy; Personal, Social and Emotional Development; Physical Development and Movement; and The World Around Us.

The CCEA also produces a range of other resources such as Growing for the Future which is intended to encourage Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2 pupils to grow and cook their own food.

In correspondence with the Committee for Education, the CCEA confirmed that there is no specific resource at Key Stage 3.

The Education Authority runs the Magilligan Field Centre (MFC)[28] as well as six outdoor residential centres in Coleraine, Omagh, Killyleagh, Enniskillen, Newcastle and Kilrea.[29] MFC staff facilitate and provide support for teachers and students in the delivery of outdoor education programmes with a primary focus on field study investigations. These are delivered across a range of subject areas, in a variety of settings and to a range of age groups from pre-school children to adult learners. Programmes are run on a day or residential visit. According to the MFC website:

"We promote and support learning outside and inside the classroom, exemplifying Education for Sustainable Development. Our programmes are linked and mapped to the NI Curriculum and provide participatory learning experiences which develop thinking skills and personal capabilities."

Other Executive departments and local councils are also involved in outdoor education. The Department of Agriculture, Environment, and Rural Affairs (DAERA) for example, has a list of forest education programmes[30] while Sport NI runs the Tollymore National Outdoor Centre[31] (currently under review) and Belfast City Council organises the ParkLife programme[32] for schools in its area

[28] Magilligan Field Centre accessed 10 September 2025

[29] Outdoor Learning Centres | Education Authority Northern Ireland

[30] Education programmes | Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs accessed 26 September 2025

[31] Tollymore National Outdoor Centre | Sport NI accessed 26 September 2025. The future of the centre is currently under review Tollymore: Fears for future of mothballed outdoor activity centre - BBC News 3 August 2025

[32] ParkLife education | Belfast accessed 26 September 2025

(see below for details of the evaluation of this programme undertaken by Queen's University Belfast).

3.2 A thematic review of outdoor education in Northern Ireland

In 2021, the Education and Training Inspectorate published a thematic review of outdoors education in Northern Ireland, entitled Pre-school and foundation stage: delivering the curriculum outdoors. It found that successes in outdoor learning included:

- Creative well planned responses by leaders to Covid-19 guidance
- Children's enjoyment and engagement in learning "through explorative play within the stimulating and well-presented outdoor areas in most of the settings visited"
- Recognition of the benefits of outdoor learning from staff and leaders particularly in relation to well-being and concentration, including for children with special educational needs
- Holistic approaches to planning across the pre-school and foundation curriculum, particularly in relation to the World Around Us
- Increased outdoor opportunities for children to engage in physical play, develop language and communication skills, make confident choices and decisions about learning and to investigate the natural environment and take responsibility for its care
- Access to additional funding streams from DE and the EA

The ETI also noted a number of challenges:

- The lack of staff training in pre-schools and primary schools on children's learning in outdoor environments
- The lack of consistent approaches to monitoring and evaluating the quality of learning and the benefits to children's health and well-being
- Challenges for schools with no covered areas or suitable clothing for children due to bad weather
- The need for more use of the outdoors for storytelling, singing and the Arts
- The lack of suitable outdoor storage for foundation stage classes

3.3 The Outdoor Learning Project

The Minister for Education, Paul Givan, launched the Outdoor Learning Project in February 2025, which was intended to allocate £4m to schools by March 2025. It was targeted at pre-schools, nursery, primary and special schools to buy outdoor furniture and equipment to enhance high-quality outdoor learning. It is part of DE's Curriculum-led Capital Programme.[33] The objectives of the Project are to:

- Increase the use of creative outdoor spaces for play and learning opportunities for all children
- Increase children's physical; mental health and wellbeing and social interaction, through high quality outdoor play and learning
- Support pupils to increase their motivation, engagement, resilience, self-esteem and confidence, through better engagement in play
- Support and enhance pupils' development including personal capabilities and managing risks in safe outdoor spaces
- Build capacity within the educational workforce to make better use of the space available for creative and innovative opportunities for outdoor play and learning[34]

In total, 93 nursery schools, 776 primary schools and 40 special settings received funding, alongside 313 non-statutory pre-school setting received funding.[35]

3.4 Initial Teacher Training

Stranmillis University College has incorporated compulsory nature awareness in all its undergraduate and post-graduate teacher training.[36] In partnership with Keep Northern Ireland Beautiful, and supported by Energia's *Greener*

[33] Outdoor Learning Project | Department of Education accessed 28 August 2025

[34] Outdoor Learning Project Guidance February 2025 accessed 28 August 2025

[35] Final Spreadsheet of Allocations - Outdoor Learning Project 2025 | Department of Education accessed 28 August 2025

[36] Stranmillis University College, Belfast Championing Outdoor Learning accessed 28 August 2025

Possibilities fund and the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA), the College has recently launched a new outdoor learning and environmental education facility "designed to prepare future teachers to lead the way in sustainability and climate education". The facility includes a range of outdoor learning spaces, including a mini orchard, polytunnel, fruit bushes, woodland area, group shelter, willow dome, wildflower meadow, and raised planting beds. The College states that "these diverse habitats offer student teachers practical opportunities to engage with biodiversity, environmental protection, and food growing in a hands-on way."[37]

3.5 Other organisations supporting outdoor education in NI

There are a number of other organisations supporting outdoor education in Northern Ireland, as described in the table below.

Organisation	Description
NI Forest Schools Association (NIFSA)	NIFSA is an independent charity which has delivered and supported outdoor education in NI schools since 2008. It has accredited over 600 teachers with the Forest School Leaders qualification (Level 3), recognised 257 official NIFSA forest schools and supported between 5,000 and 6,000 pupils learning outside every month.[38] It has a permanent Forest School site in Clandeboye Estate, Bangor which hosts schools, nurseries and other groups, including afterschool clubs. The NIFSA website provides resources for schools and families as well as research for practitioners and other interested parties. According to NIFSA:

[37] As above

[38] Presentation at the Committee for Education event (19/3/25) and Forest Schools in Northern Ireland accessed 28 August 2025

Organisation	Description
	"The ethos of Forest School is based on a fundamental respect for children and young people and for their capacity to instigate, test and maintain curiosity in the world around them. It believes in children's right to play; the right to access the outdoors (and in particular a woodland environment); the right to access risk and the vibrant reality of the natural world; and the right to experience a healthy range of emotions, through all the challenges of social interaction, to build a resilience that will enable continued and creative engagement with their peers and their potential."
Beach Schools	Beach Schools have emerged as an off-shoot of Forest Schools. There is now one Beach School in operation in Northern Ireland, located on the North Coast.[39] According to its website: "Beach Schools provide an opportunity for children to develop their curiosity for the natural world while supporting mental and physical welling by encouraging children to play on the sand dunes and splash in rock pools".
Eco-schools	Eco-Schools is a programme that helps schools integrate environmental education into daily learning and school culture. According to its website, The programme links to the curriculum and promotes hands-on learning and environmental action both in and outside the classroom. Schools that meet key criteria can earn the Green Flag award, an internationally recognised symbol of environmental

[39] Beach Schools NI | It's time to explore the shore! accessed 10 September 2025

Organisation	Description
	achievement. This award must be renewed every two years.[40] In 2025, Northern Ireland became the second country in the world to have 50% of schools having an active Green Flag. This is five years ahead of the UNESCO target of 50% of schools greened by 2030.
Playboard NI	Playboard NI is a membership organisation which supports primary schools to improve their outdoor play experiences through our well-established Positive PlayGrounds training programme. It provides the Taking Outdoor Play Seriously (TOPS) Quality Assurance Award which recognises schools for their commitment to outdoor play.[41]
Field Studies Ireland	Field Studies Ireland is a not-for-profit, social enterprise, specialising in Outdoor Education, based in Tollymore Forest. According to its website "we exist to empower you to use the outdoors for education, development and wellbeing."[42] It offers field trips linked to the NI Curriculum and training for adults on subjects such as teaching science outdoors.

3.6 Evaluations of outdoor education in Northern Ireland

There have been several evaluations of outdoor education in Northern Ireland, conducted by Dr Karen Kerr of Queen's University Belfast.

[40] Introduction to Eco-Schools accessed 10 September 2025

[41] PlayBoard NI – Leading The Play Agenda accessed 10 September 2025

[42] Field Studies Ireland | Empowering Access to Outdoor Education accessed 10 September 2025

The ParkLife Programme is a programme provided by Belfast City Council for schools in its area, which is aligned to the curriculum. It focuses on Key Stage 2 pupils and supports learning on:

- Animal and bird survival
- How trees change with the seasons
- Minibeasts and how to find them
- History and heritage in Belfast's parks[43]

Dr Kerr's evaluation of the ParkLife programme found that:[44]

"As a result of the positive findings from this evaluation, it is apparent that learning outdoors in local parks through the ParkLife Education Programme, is a very positive experience for children across all the primary outcomes measured (Spend more time engaging with nature in their local parks; Have learned more about their local park; Be more connected to nature). It was also a very positive experience across all the secondary outcomes measured (Have more positive attitudes towards and awareness of environmental sustainability, Have more positive attitudes to learning outdoors, Rate their health and well-being as higher). As a result of the findings, the ParkLife Education Programme should be considered as good practice and so the programme should continue to be delivered in its current model so many more children can benefit."

Dr Kerr also undertook an evaluation of Ulster Wildlife's Grassroots Challenge. The Challenge is a Lottery funded project to equip 5,000 young people "with the skills, knowledge and confidence to give nature a helping hand in their local communities, through the delivery of 'wild idea' projects." [45]

While there are some caveats in the evaluation report around the sample size due to limitations on the programme during the pandemic, Dr Kerr concludes:

[43] ParkLife education | Belfast accessed 24 September 2025

[44] Kerr, K. (2017) Report for Belfast City Council: An evaluation of the ParkLife Education Programme. Belfast: School of Social Sciences, Education and Social Work, Queen's University Belfast.

[45] Grassroots initiative helps young people champion nature | Ulster Wildlife accessed 24 September 2025

"The young people who took part rated their connectedness to nature as higher at the end of the project activities, more of them said they would now take part in environmental/nature/wildlife actions. They rated their overall Leadership Competence as a little higher at the end of the project but they rated their perceptions of their ability to influence environmental policy decisions as much higher at the end of the project. They also recognised that making a difference for nature makes a difference for them. It can be concluded that whilst most of the participants involved in the focus groups would like to be involved in making a difference for nature, there is a very clear message that there are not enough opportunities nor mechanisms to do so."[46]

A recent, as yet unpublished, paper on the impact of the Northern Ireland Forest School Association[47], notes that slightly more schools in Northern Ireland are accredited as Forest Schools than in Great Britain (27% compared to c22%) despite the lack of central government funding in Northern Ireland. Around four in five of the teachers (many of whom were Forest Leaders) who participated in this research strongly agreed that forest school positively impacts children and young people's behaviour (79%) and educational attainment (80%).The paper identifies the top three barriers to teachers using the outdoors as: time (40%); funding (34%); and support from Government bodies (17%).

In this study, NIFSA was mentioned most frequently (45 times) when respondents were asked to identify their sources of funding and/or resourcing for their outdoor learning or forest school setting. The report also states that nearly all participants agreed that NIFSA has contributed to taking their learning outside.

4 Learning from elsewhere

This section of the paper considers outdoor education elsewhere in the UK and the Republic of Ireland. Given the broad nature of outdoor education and the

[46] Kerr, K. (2020) Report for Ulster Wildlife: An evaluation of the Grassroots Challenge Project 2019-20. Belfast: School of Social Sciences, Education and Social Work, Queen's University Belfast.

[47] B McCormick (nd), Evaluation of the Impact of Northern Ireland Forest School Association, Ulster University

number of organisations involved, it is by necessity a brief overview of the current context in each jurisdiction.

4.1 Outdoor learning in Scotland

Scotland has had a commitment to outdoor education since at least 2006. In 2010, the Scottish Government published the Curriculum for Excellence through Outdoor Learning with the following vision:

- 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

The Curriculum document states clearly in its introduction that:

"The journey through education for any child in Scotland must include opportunities for a series of planned, quality outdoor learning experiences. Curriculum for Excellence through Outdoor Learning is designed to help teachers, educators, Community Learning and Development (CLD) and their partners, including the voluntary sector, plan such experiences to ensure that progressive and sustainable outdoor learning opportunities are embedded in the new curriculum."

Scotland published a National Position Statement on outdoor learning and play in 2018, grounded in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.[48] The statement reads:

[48] Inspiring Scotland Scotland's Outdoor Play and Learning National Position Statement (2018)

"We will work together to embed playing and learning outdoors as an everyday activity and we will celebrate it as a fundamental part of growing up in Scotland."

The statement was produced by the Coalition for Playing and Learning Outdoors, drafted by a group of 50 organisations comprising "those who can influence the development of public spaces and organisations whose work influences how children in Scotland grow up".[49]

They commit to collaborating on:

- Widening access to the high-quality, diverse greenspaces and natural landscapes that exist throughout all communities to ensure that all children, young people and families have easy, local access to excellent outdoor play.
- Opening up more of communal and publicly-managed spaces for playing and learning outdoors, ensuring that children and young people know they are entitled to access these spaces and feel safe and comfortable using them.
- Enhancing and enriching urban greenspace and built environments to be inviting, play-friendly places, offering easy access to the outdoors and nature close to home.
- Empowering every adult involved in the lives of children and young people with the confidence, enthusiasm and skills to encourage and support them to play and learn outdoors.
- Generating and sharing knowledge and evidence-based research to promote better understanding of the benefits of playing and learning outdoors.

The Statement also lists the relevant policy frameworks and documents that reflect the "national expectation" that "outdoor learning experiences for children [are] key to provision of high quality learning". It clarifies that it uses the phrase "children and young people" to mean:

[49] As above

"Anyone under the age of 18 years old, as well any young people whose additional needs or circumstances mean they may benefit from playing and learning outdoors beyond the age of 18. "Young people" has been included in the statement, in favour of the United Nations definition of a child as anyone under 18 years old, to reflect our intention to demonstrate that playing and learning outdoors should not be limited to younger children but encouraged for all young people."

The Statement has now been signed by over 100 organisations.

The Scottish Vision for Play 2025-2030 also notes the importance of outdoor play and learning, and presents developments over the last number of years such as the policy in the National Planning Framework

"Which encourage[s], promote[s] and facilitate[s] spaces and opportunities for outdoor play, recreation and sport in our natural and built environment, supporting health and wellbeing of our communities, including the healthy development of our children and the wellbeing of families."

A members bill currently passing through the Scottish Parliament aims to give children and young people a minimum entitlement to residential outdoor education in the course of their school career. Introduced by MSP Liz Smith, the Schools (Residential Outdoor Education) (Scotland) Bill aims to give all pupils in state and grant-aided schools the chance to experience at least four nights and five days of residential outdoor education during their school career.[50] In an interview with BBC News, the MSP states that:

"The statistics we have show that if they have participated in residential outdoor education, their attendance is better, their behaviour is better, their self-discipline is better. What could be better than that?" [51]

In the same article, the BBC notes that "there is a postcode lottery in provision of residential outdoor education, with research for the University of Edinburgh

[50] Schools (Residential Outdoor Education) (Scotland) Bill | Scottish Parliament Website

[51] Should all pupils get the right to an outdoor education week? *BBC News*, 8 September 2025

stating that just a third of secondary schools and only a quarter of primary schools offer this type of experience."

While there is broad support for the Bill in the Scottish Parliament, there are concerns about the costs of the measures and the impact on other aspects of school budgets. The Bill is currently at Stage 2 which means it will depend on financial agreement from the Scottish Government to progress.[52]

4.2 Outdoor education in England

According to Learning through Landscapes, "*starting with EYFS outdoor spaces and provision, through quality curriculum and learning approaches in Primary and Secondary, outdoor learning has a long history in England".*[53]

Outdoor learning is specified as a requirement in the National Curriculum in England in Key Stages 2-4, for example at Key Stage 4, it specifies that pupils should:

"Take part in further outdoor and adventurous activities in a range of environments which present intellectual and physical challenges and which encourage pupils to work in a team, building on trust and developing skills to solve problems, either individually or as a group"[54]

Under the previous Conservative Government, the National Youth Guarantee was introduced in 2022, which was a pledge "for all young people to be given access to more activities, trips away from home and volunteering opportunities by 2025, backed by an investment of £560m."[55] There have also been collaborations between the Department for Education, DEFRA and Natural England to encourage outdoor education, including the use of care farms.[56]

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[52] Schools (Residential Outdoor Education) (Scotland) Bill | Scottish Parliament Website accessed 10 September 2025

[53] Outdoor Learning Policies England| Learning through Landscapes accessed 10 September 2025

[54] Department for Education The national curriculum in England - Framework document (2014)

[55] Outdoor Learning Policy Report

[56] Care farms, offer people with defined health, social or educational needs the chance to participate in a variety of farming activities, for therapeutic benefit. Children & Nature Programme: the importance of integrating time spent in nature at school – Natural England accessed 12 September 2025

A Private Member's Bill on outdoor education, introduced by Tim Farron MP, is currently at the Second Reading Stage in the House of Commons. It is " a Bill to require that every child be offered at least one outdoor education experience. during primary school years and at least one such experience during secondary school years; and for connected purposes."[57]

One of the most cited (and largest) outdoor learning project in England is the Natural Connections Project which is described in more detail below.

4.2.1 The Natural Connections Project

Natural Connections was a four year project (2012 to 2016) funded by Defra, Natural England and Historic England, and delivered by Plymouth University. It encompassed 125 primary, post-primary and special schools and 40,000 pupils. The project methodology was based on a central team at the University who recruited 'hub leaders' in five areas of deprivation across Bristol, Cornwall, North Somerset, Plymouth and Torbay. Hub leaders, then schools that were already delivering some outdoor learning (beacon schools), were recruited to support less experienced schools (cluster schools) to develop their outdoor learning.[58]

Each project school established an outdoor learning team (including an outdoor learning lead, member of senior management, a governor, parent, teachers and other staff) to make the project sustainable in the long term.

Natural Connections schools reported that learning in natural environments had a positive impact on their pupils:

- Enjoyment of lessons (95%)
- Engagement with and understanding of nature (94%)
- Social skills (93%)
- Engagement with learning (92%)
- Health and wellbeing (92%)

[57] Outdoor Education Bill - Parliamentary Bills - UK Parliament

[58] Transforming outdoor learning in schools: lessons from the Natural Connections Project

- Behaviour (85%)
- Attainment (57%)

Project schools also reported benefits for teachers in relation to:

- Teaching practice (79%)
- Health and wellbeing (72%)
- Professional development (69%)
- Job satisfaction (69%)

The Project evaluation lists five key recommendations for the successful delivery of outdoor learning:

1. The whole school to be on board with outdoor learning
2. Collaborate and network with others outside of the school to develop outdoor learning
3. Make use of school grounds and local spaces
4. Provide formal and informal CPD opportunities to build confidence and practice
5. Demonstrate and record progress

4.3 Outdoor education in Wales

The Welsh Curriculum (2020) has a strong focus on outdoor learning. Guidance accompanying the new Curriculum emphasises the benefits of outdoor education:

"Learning outdoors can lead to high levels of well-being, confidence and engagement. In an outdoor environment, learners can explore, practise and enhance their skills… Being outdoors supports social, emotional, spiritual and physical development, as well as providing authentic opportunities for learners to develop and consolidate cross-curricular skills.[59]

The outdoors provides opportunities to inspire awe and wonder, and allows learners to be themselves in open, relaxed and stimulating spaces. The use of

[59] Defined in Wales as literacy, numeracy and digital skills

natural and open-ended resources enhances the development of imagination, creativity and curiosity. Rich and authentic opportunities outdoors stimulate learners' senses through what they hear, touch, see and smell, and encourage them to express themselves.

Learners who are able to engage and connect with the natural world can build an empathy for the environment, showing an awareness of their potential impact on the living world. They can begin to explore the concept of sustainability in a practical way. Exploring the outdoors provides opportunities for learners to develop a sense of place within their immediate surroundings, their locality, Wales and the wider world."[60]

A recent (2023) research report on outdoor education in Wales notes that the Curriculum includes the notion of "cynefin", which it explains as follows:

"Cynefin embodies the idea of connecting people with the place where they belong and where they are encouraged and supported to engage with the environment around them (Welsh Government, 2021). Cynefin is therefore linked not only to outdoor learning as a pedagogy but as a legitimation of place-based identity." [61]

The Wales Council for Outdoor Learning brings together all stakeholders involved in Outdoor Learning in Wales. [62] In its framework for High Quality Outdoor Learning, the Council notes:

"The Environment Act (Wales) 2016 and the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act (Wales) 2015 together create modern legislation for improving the social, economic, environmental and cultural wellbeing of Wales. Outdoor learning contributes to all seven Wellbeing Goals as well as providing 'opportunities and activities that expand horizons within and beyond the traditional learning environment of the classroom".

[60] Education Wales Pedagogy - Hwb – accessed 12 September 2025

[61] Education Wales Teaching and learning in the outdoors: the current state of outdoor learning in schools in Wales 2023

[62] Outdoor Learning | Wales Council For Outdoor Learning accessed 12 September 2025

In the research study noted above, the authors suggest however that:

"The collected data still hints at how teachers do not believe outdoor learning can effectively cover all aspects of the curriculum and learning. This may be due to a lack of understanding of the term 'outdoor learning' and how it can be used as a pedagogy to effectively teach the curriculum. Without knowledge about what outdoor learning is, how it can be used, and how it can benefit teaching and learning, teachers may not intentionally use it… Without skills and practice, even theoretical knowledge of outdoor learning… may not turn into actual pedagogies. There needs to be a systematic approach to embedding meaningful learning… If teachers and support staff believed in the value of outdoor learning and were supported in their endeavours to accomplish these aims, it is possible that outdoor learning would turn from a fringe add-on to a mainstream pedagogical practice throughout Wales.[63]

The authors do recognise the limitations of their research conclusions given the very low response rate to the study, attributed to the time of year in which the fieldwork was undertaken and to the research burden on schools. They do however note that their findings are consistent with the current literature on the subject.

4.4 Outdoor education in the Republic of Ireland

The main focus of state-organised outdoor education in the Republic of Ireland appears to be centres run by the Education and Training Boards. There is, however, explicit mention of the outdoors as a learning environment (one of the eight principles underpinning the curriculum) in the new primary curriculum (2023)[64] and curriculum resources for outdoor learning are provided through Scoilnet[65] and the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, particularly for early years and primary education.[66] There are also a number of voluntary

[63] See footnote 57

[64] National Council for Curriculum and Assessment Primary Curriculum Framework for Primary and Special Schools (2023)

[65] Outdoor Lessons and Activities - Scoilnet accessed 25 September 2025

[66] Outdoor Learning | NCCA accessed 25 September 2025

organisations such as the Irish Forest School Association[67] and Green Schools[68], which is similar to the Eco Schools initiative cited above.

Education and Training Boards operate 12 Outdoor Education and Training Centres (OETCs) across the Republic of Ireland and an Outdoor Education Support Service in Dublin.[69] The Outdoor Education programmes on offer use adventure sports and the outdoor environment "to challenge students to realise their potential, develop new skills and enhance their wellbeing through time in nature". The OETCs offer residential programmes and provide courses for primary, post-primary and further education and training students.

The Education and Training Board Ireland (ETBI) published a strategic framework for the future of Outdoor Education for 2021-2023 which it describes as:

"An ambitious agenda for the development of ETB Outdoor Education and Training Provision as Outdoor Education and Training Centres. The sector starts this journey from an excellent base. It provides 100,000 participants with educational and developmental experiences in the outdoors, offers a broad range of programmes for participants in every age bracket and has built a depth of experience and expertise in its provision".[70]

There is a group of two schools in Donegal, Early Learning Schools, which cater for pupils up to the age of 12, which conduct nearly all lessons outside. Their website states:

"Our children follow the same curriculum as other pre-schools and prepare for primary school in the exact same way. The only difference is our tables are outside and instead of blackboards, we use trees".[71]

[67] The Irish Forest School Association | Irish Forest School Association accessed 25 September 2025

[68] About The Programme | Green-Schools accessed 25 September 2025

[69] Outdoor Education – ETBI accessed 25 September 2025

[70] EBTI Outdoor Education and Training Provision A strategic framework for the sector 2021-2023 (2022)

[71] Early Learning accessed 25 September 2025

In these Early Learning schools, where 80% of the learning is outside, the school "ensures that all children are dressed appropriately, providing thermal underwear and rain-suits if need be". In an interview, the owner of the schools states "there is no such this as bad weather, only inappropriate clothing."[72]

A number of research papers have considered outdoor education in Ireland, and appear to suggest that outdoor education is important in Ireland but could be more structured and embedded in the education system. A 2025 paper based on a review of the literature on outdoor learning published between 2012 and 2023 found that:

"While many progressive curriculum changes have taken place in Ireland in the past quarter century (Gleeson, 2022), using outdoor settings as a structured element of teaching and learning has yet to be fully established (O'Malley & Pierce, 2023). Weak connections between society and the landscape (Hannon,2015; Lysaght, 1998) and the under-development of place-based educational strategies (Pierce & Telford, 2023) would appear to have created an environment that, perhaps, has provided little encouragement of outdoor pedagogies as a strategy in curriculum design or for curriculum delivery."[73]

This study found that there was a need for more "nationwide reporting" of outdoor learning and more quantitative data to provide a robust evidence base for policy makers. It also found that existing research in Ireland tends to focus on early years and primary education and less so on post-primary and further education.

A further qualitative research study based on interviews conducted with 10 experienced outdoor education practitioners states that:

"A feature of Irish outdoor learning has been its 'haphazard and accidental' development, 'devoid of strategic interventions by policymakers or institutions'

[72] Back to the Basics: Outdoor Schools and Programmes Building Confidence and Promoting Well-Being | Outsider.ie accessed 25 September 2025

[73] Tomás Aylward, Maura Coulter & Tom Farrelly (22 Apr 2025): Outdoor learning on the edge of Europe: a systematic review of practice from Ireland, Journal of Adventure Education and Outdoor Learning, DOI: 10.1080/14729679.2025.2494033

(Hannon, 2018, p. 204) with the exception of the early childhood education and care (ECEC) sector".[74]

The authors of this study developed the diagram below to encapsulate the components and conditions for successful outdoor learning, based on the themes emerging from these interviews.

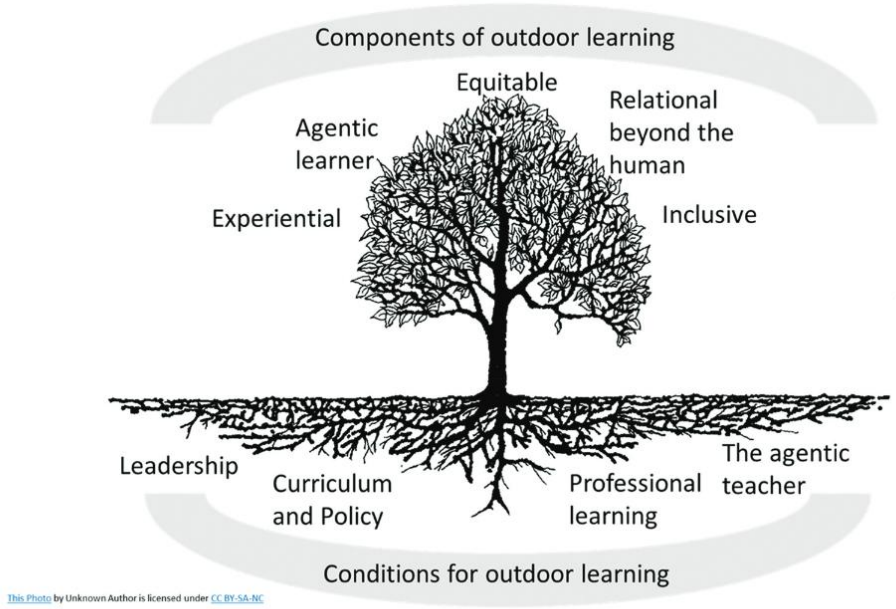

Figure 1. A pedagogy of outdoor learning.

Source: Orla Kelly, Joan Whelan & Maura Coulter (15 Mar 2025): A pedagogy of outdoor learning in the primary school – Insights from outdoor educators in Ireland, Journal of Adventure Education and Outdoor Learning

5 Issues relating to outdoor education in Northern Ireland

This section of the paper considers some of issues relating, or potentially relating to, a strategy for outdoor education in Northern Ireland, based on current practice, stakeholder contributions and lessons from elsewhere. These include:

- Culture and commitment
- Collaboration and partnership working

[74]Orla Kelly, Joan Whelan & Maura Coulter (15 Mar 2025): A pedagogy of outdoor learning in the primary school – Insights from outdoor educators in Ireland, Journal of Adventure Education and Outdoor Learning, DOI: 10.1080/14729679.2025.2477982

- Funding issues
- The NI Curriculum
- Teacher training and development
- Inclusive approaches
- The school estate

5.1 Culture and commitment

In its definition of outdoor learning, the English Outdoor Council says that "outdoor learning is real learning" as a common core characteristic. Many of the sources cited in this paper suggest that there needs to be a real commitment to the belief that outdoor learning is real learning for it to be successful – not just at the school level but also at the system level. The Natural Connection Project evaluation emphasised the importance of getting the whole school on board and the Canadian study cited above called out "leadership support" in particular.

With multiple definitions of outdoor education and learning and a spectrum of activities and settings from "mud kitchens" and vegetable patches in school playgrounds to residential settings away from home, it could be useful to have a shared understanding of the meaning of outdoor education in the Northern Ireland context. Some research has suggested that the lack of an agreed definition has hindered the implementation of outdoor education or learning as an integral part of the system.

5.2 Collaboration and partnership working

This paper has outlined examples of outdoors education in Northern Ireland and elsewhere. Some of the examples it has presented have been dependent on cross-departmental, cross-agency and cross-sector collaboration. In Scotland, for example, the National Position Statement on outdoor learning has been signed by over 100 organisations. The Natural Connections Project in England was a collaboration between Defra, Natural England and Historic England, delivered by Plymouth University in partnership with local schools. At the school level, partnership working was also very important to this project, with a model of beacon and cluster schools.

In Northern Ireland, a partnership approach is also evident in the work conducted by Executive departments, government agencies and local councils as well as voluntary sector organisations such as the Northern Ireland Forest School Association, for example the forest education programme led by DAERA. Support in navigating the various organisations involved in outdoor education, through a central website, could be useful for teachers and parents or carers.

5.3 Funding issues

Funding has been identified in several sources as a potential barrier to outdoor education, depending on the type of outdoor education being undertaken i.e. whether the education is on or off the school site, whether equipment is required and whether there is provision for protective clothing and footwear. This can manifest in a number of different ways, including:

- Staffing ratios: are there sufficient teachers and other appropriate adults to support the activity?
- Transport: can schools and students readily access suitable transport to access outdoor education settings off-site? This is likely to be particularly important for more remote residential sites
- Equipment: are schools able to fund appropriate equipment and clothing for outdoor education?[75]
- Equitable access: can children and young people from lower income backgrounds participate fully in outdoor education activities?

5.4 The NI Curriculum

Consideration could also be given perhaps to more direct links to outdoor learning in the curriculum, particularly at the post-primary level. It does appear that in Northern Ireland, as in the Republic of Ireland, the focus of support for outdoor education tends to be at the early years and primary levels. This would

[75] The Outdoor Guide Foundation aims to donate 10 pairs of waterproofs and Wellingtons to all state schools in the UK as a recognition of the lack of suitable clothing as a barrier to accessing outdoors education and play.

be important given that concerns about meeting curriculum demands has been shown to be a barrier to outdoor education.

The Curriculum for Excellence through Outdoor Education in Scotland is a good example of a resource for all partners in the education system, including the voluntary system to embed “progressive and sustainable outdoor learning opportunities” in the new curriculum. It also encompasses ages three to 18 so explicitly includes post-primary education.

The underpinning principles of the recently published NI Curriculum Review could also be considered in any development of an outdoor learning strategy i.e.: purpose-led; knowledge-rich; continuous and coherent; specific and focused; and inclusive and flexible.

5.5 Teacher training and development

Several sources have mentioned initial teacher training and continuous professional development as very important to effective outdoor education, particularly in overcoming any confidence issues that teachers might experience. The ETI thematic report cited above, for example, found a lack of staff training in pre-schools and primary schools on children’s learning outdoors. Including outdoor learning in teacher training and development could also help teachers assuage any concerns that parents might have about the rigour of outdoor learning or about any health and safety issues. It also relates to the development of a culture of, and commitment to, outdoor education discussed above.

On its website, Stranmillis University College states that its outdoor learning initiative is:

“Designed to boost teacher confidence in delivering climate and environmental education, a goal rooted in global research: a UNESCO study found that while

95% of teachers see climate education as important, less than 30% feel ready to teach it."[76]

It could perhaps be useful to gather examples of good practice in outdoor education for teachers to share across the system and also to monitor and report whether teachers in Northern Ireland experience benefits similar to those reported by teachers in the course of the Natural Connections Project in England such as reduced stress and greater job satisfaction..

5.6 Inclusive approaches

There is some research evidence to suggest that children and young people with SEN can benefit from outdoor education, as it removes the formality of the classroom inside school buildings and encourages creativity and play. Consideration should therefore be given to the accessibility of outdoor settings (including access to suitable outdoor clothing) and whether there are sufficient opportunities for pupils with SEN to enjoy outdoor education on site and off site.

5.7 School estate

Consideration should be given to how best to exploit the existing school estate to provide opportunities for outdoor education and learning, whether this be a kitchen garden or a mud kitchen, and how to best use outdoor space for new schools. Issues such as the security and safety of the estate should also be taken into consideration. Teachers and other school staff could also be supported and given guidance on making best use of local parks and outdoor residential centres to overcome any limitations on space in the school grounds. As noted above, the needs of pupils with SEN will also be important in relation to the accessibility of outdoor education settings.

[76] Stranmillis University College Championing Outdoor Learning accessed 25 September 2025

6 Conclusions

This paper has focused on the impacts and issues relating to outdoor education in Northern Ireland, in the context of a stakeholder event hosted by the Committee for Education and supported by the Northern Ireland Forest School Association in March 2025 to debate whether Northern Ireland needs an outdoor education strategy.

There is a consensus in the literature that outdoor education has many benefits for children and young people, with positive impacts on their physical and mental health, well-being, personal development and learning ability. There are however barriers to implementing outdoor education such as a lack of suitable outdoor space and clothing; fears about risks outside; concerns about meeting curriculum demands; concerns about managing behaviour outside the classroom; and a lack of confidence on the part of some teachers.

This paper also considers aspects of outdoor education in Scotland, Wales, England and the Republic of Ireland. Scotland appears to be the most advanced in terms of outdoor education with a Curriculum for Excellence in Outdoor Education published in 2010 and a National Position Statement on outdoor learning and play published in 2018, which is grounded in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.[77]

It concludes by exploring a number of issues which may impact any strategy for outdoor education, including: culture and commitment; collaboration and partnership working; funding issues; the NI Curriculum; teacher training and development; inclusive approaches; and the school estate.

[77] Inspiring Scotland Scotland's Outdoor Play and Learning National Position Statement (2018)