

## THE SUSTAINABLE MANAGEMENT OF LOCAL SPACES USED REGULARLY FOR LEARNING AND PLAY

### A case study report for Scottish Forestry



#### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report, commissioned by Scottish Forestry, explores the issues of sustainable site management for Early Learning and Childcare (ELC) outdoors, to provide case studies, and adjust existing guidance to reflect best practice. A variety of urban sites were visited, in and around Glasgow, and the issue of access, use and care of sites discussed with practitioners and land managers. Case studies included outdoor kindergarten, nursery, forest school and out of school care groups. Impacts were observed on access paths, soils, ground vegetation, and trees in areas of concentrated use such as play camps. Mechanisms such as permission to use, and rotating sites were found to be important in managing impacts through overuse. Building good relationships between education/ play groups, landowners/ managers and the local community was also fundamental to good practice. Some groups clearly had a positive impact through clearing litter and adding community value to otherwise neglected areas. A number of group leaders acknowledged that a lack of formal ecological knowledge may get in the way of fully recognising the impacts their group has over time on a site. This highlights the need for training to help group leaders understand, monitor and use sites more sustainably, and involve the children they support in this environmental stewardship.

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## THE RATIONALE

In Scotland, over the past decade leading up to 2020, there has been a big push for children in Early Learning and Childcare (ELC) to have access to natural outdoor spaces for play and learning.

Scottish Government document [A Blueprint For 2020: The Expansion of Early Learning and Childcare in Scotland Quality Action Plan](#) describes the Scottish Government's planned expansion in Early Learning and Childcare in Scotland. Earlier, in 2013, the Scottish Government's 'The Play Strategy (2013) Vision and Action Plan' documents cited the need for children and young people to be able to have daily free play opportunities in natural spaces (Creative STAR Learning webpage *Significant Scottish Outdoor Learning and Play Documents* accessed 06/01/20)

The guidance documents [Space to Grow](#) (2017), with a number of associated documents, and [Out to Play](#) (2018), have been developed to support outdoor play experiences, with practical guidance, respectively. They describe three models of ELC registration types:

1. Indoor settings with attached outdoor spaces which may wish to improve or increase their access to the outdoors
2. Dispersed or satellite outdoor services which shares the management structure with an existing early learning and childcare setting nearby
3. Outdoor settings with minimal built infrastructure and its own management, structure and registration

With the expansion of early years provision and the use of the outdoors, in particular ELC registration types 2 and 3, there is increasing demand for more local greenspaces to be used on a regular basis for outdoor play and learning. Underpinning any outdoor practice should be an ethos of environmental care and stewardship, and [Learning for Sustainability](#), where *'every practitioner, school and education leader should demonstrate learning for sustainability in their practice.'*

There are a number of studies on outdoor play and learning that focus on the positive impact the natural environment has *on children's development* (for example Fjortoft, 2001); but there has been less attention on the *physical impact children have on their natural environment* through outdoor activities. However, the overuse of some sites is becoming apparent in some areas (particularly urban) reducing the value of that space for play, learning and biodiversity.

This report was commissioned by Scottish Forestry to explore the issues of sustainable site management for ELC outdoors, to provide case studies, and adjust existing guidance to reflect best practice.

## SELECTION OF CASE STUDIES

Suitable case study sites needed to be identified from providers in urban settings. This involved literature and online searches, and contacting key early years and outdoor practitioners across Scotland. The Scottish Outdoor Nursery Managers and Outdoor & Woodland Learning (OWL) Scotland Facebook groups also proved helpful. A range of contacts across Glasgow, Edinburgh and to a lesser extent Dundee were emailed the same enquiry (early feedback ruled out Aberdeen) and likely providers were contacted for permission to use their settings as case studies.

As positive responses were largely received from Glasgow based practitioners, this provided the geographic focus for the case studies listed below. These are divided into 4 themes:

1. **Out of School Care:**

**Auchinairn Out of School Care (OSC)** – private woodland on the outskirts of Bishopbriggs, managed by Galbraith, a property services company, on behalf of Caledonian Estate, and leased to Auchinairn Out of School Care (a Social Enterprise company) for after school Forest School sessions.

2. **Community:**

**Bishop Loch/ Easterhouse Woods** – one of 5 sites comprising the Easterhouse woods, owned by Glasgow City Council, and managed by Forestry & Land Scotland (FLS). The woodlands are used by a wide range of play, education and community groups.

**Castlemilk Woodlands** - owned and managed by Glasgow City Council/ Castlemilk Park volunteers. The site is used by a wide range of education and community groups, and in particular the neighbourhood nurseries represented on the Castlemilk Partnership Steering Group.

3. **ELC Students:**

**Glasgow Clyde College/ Pollok Park** – Owned and managed by Glasgow City Council. This fragment of the Country Park is used by Glasgow Clyde College (Cardonald campus) to deliver Forest School sessions to HNC Level 7 Childhood Practice students.

4. **Private partner provider outdoor nursery:**

**Woodland Outdoor Kindergartens/ Pollok Country Park** - Owned and managed by Glasgow City Council, and used by a wide range of education and community groups, and in particular Woodland Outdoor Kindergartens.

Each illustrated case study is written up individually in addition to this report, but the Case Studies Summary with Key Learning Points is shown in APPENDIX 1.

## BACKGROUND & EVIDENCE

### Outdoor play in nature and its importance

There is growing awareness of the value of outdoor play in nature for children of all ages. It can help develop nature connection and care for the natural world, and support physical and mental wellbeing.

As Stephen Moss (2012) points out '*unlike playgrounds created by a human designer, natural environments allow children to play in far more varied and imaginative ways.*'

Lisa Davis *et al* (Play England/ NCB 2009) describe the importance of nature play, because it can:

- *'provide contact with the living and non-living features of the natural environment*
- *connect children and young people with the nature and biodiversity of the local environment*
- *help demonstrate seasonal change*
- *encourage the use of all the senses*
- *provide natural objects to play and be creative with, such as leaves, seeds and bark.'*

Nature play in this context refers to spaces managed by the local authority, often through the parks department, countryside service or via registered social landlord.

To be sustainable, both environmentally and on cost, ideally nurseries and other settings should be able to *walk to* local greenspace rather than rely on transport. However, in most of the case studies cited here, groups still rely on transport to reach their chosen sites because they are beyond walking distance of their base.

The types of natural spaces available will depend upon local geography. Nature play can take place across a variety of habitats, which can include;

- Woodland
- Parks, with semi-natural areas
- Grassland and meadow
- Beaches

Environmental features provide a range of opportunities for interaction by children. The relationship between the structure and function of a natural landscape and its affordances for play has been described by Fjortoft (2001) with particular reference to the impact on motor development in children. Anne-Marie Morrissey *et al* (2015) provide a helpful summary of thinking and research around the value of naturalized, green environments for children's development and play. Each type of natural space offers its own play affordances. For example, open-ended 'playful' features (Davis *et al*, Play England/ NCB 2009) in the woodland environment might include:

- Water – pond, streams, ditches, puddles – play value for paddling, splashing, filling containers

- Plants – ground vegetation, shrubs, climbing plants – play value for discovery, hiding, den building
- Trees - living, and deadwood - standing and lying/ logs, brash – play value for climbing, jumping, den building
- Substrate – bare earth, leaf litter – play value for digging activities
- Variation in terrain – boulders, mounds, banks and slopes –play value, for physical challenge, running, climbing

Greenspaces with these diverse elements become desirable locations for ELC and other education groups to visit. However, lots of children repeating these activities, day after day, in a limited area, will have an impact. The degree of impact will be dependent on group size and frequency of use, interacting with weather, soil, and vegetation types.

Woodland does offer something special in Scotland's landscape, seasonal climate, and culture, by providing a sense of shelter and seclusion, and may be part of the reason why programmes like Forest Kindergarten are proving so attractive.

Many wooded urban sites which are part of Scottish Forestry's Woods in and Around Towns (WIAT) programme are now coming to the end of Phase 4 (sustaining delivery) in its [strategic plan](#). The focus for this latter stage has been how WIAT sites provide great value in supporting communities, in or around areas of high social deprivation, so this current report may be timely in the context of urban woodland management.

The Scottish Government push for outdoor play provision has resulted in innovative programmes being set up, like [the Wellie Wanderers](#) in Castlemilk. This outdoor nurseries' programme involved over 400 children from eight local nurseries spending one day per week in the woods, no matter what the weather was like.

### **The impact outdoor play and education groups have on sites**

Programmes like Forest School and Forest Kindergarten have grown in popularity in Scotland, but advocates of both programmes are aware of the potential environmental impacts. As Patrick Boxall points out '*we must expect impact and manage it.....At Newbattle we are constantly managing a complex site to meet the needs of many stakeholders and balance the heritage and conservation aspects of our land. We have exponentially increased the use of the woods as a place of learning for ourselves and the community*' (Patrick Boxall, *pers.comm.* 25.2.20)

Aline Hill and Mike Brady are both tutors with Forest School Training Co (FSTC). Aline has noted '*in general sites can look compacted and there is a lack of deadwood. Use of deadwood in fire is an increasing concern and FSTC has recommended carrying in FSC source firewood for last two years and will continue to do so*'. (Aline Hill, *pers.comm.* 25.2.20). Mike reports that he is not aware of any issues around the sustainable management of sites in the west of Scotland '*although it is something that we expect to happen in the next 12-18 months as the additional early years' hours will put more pressure on sites.*' (Mike Brady, *pers.comm.* 25.2.20)

A study on nature play areas by Browning, M. *et al* (2013), found that measurable negative impacts were caused during 33% of the time children play, where '*on average, 76% of groundcover vegetation was lost at recreation sites and 100% was lost at informal trails*'.



Soil compaction occurs when forces, such as trampling by feet, creates pressure on the soil surface and compresses the soil particles. The breakdown of soil into smaller particles reduces soil pore space and increases bulk density. The reduced pore space hinders aeration, water infiltration, and root penetration. A lack of soil oxygen and poor water drainage retards plant and tree root growth. Compaction is cited as a major cause of tree decline in urban areas by [Trees for energy conservation](#).

Play and education groups in woodland and urban greenspace often carry out activities that can have an impact on all layers within that habitat – the soil layer, field/ understory, and canopy layers (in woodlands). Activities can include building fire pits, having fires, digging soil and playing in mud, walking/ running, tree climbing, swinging, slacklining, den building, and collecting deadwood. These negative impacts and the suggested remedial management actions are summarised in a helpful [Forest School Impact Assessment Guide](#) produced by the Sylva Foundation.

In the context of urban woodlands, the [WIAT strategic framework 2015-2020](#) states that key to the continued success of this programme is active sustainable management of the woodland resource, while at the same time engaging with community groups.

The [Scottish Outdoor Access Code](#) notes that education groups ‘*can have an impact according to the size of the group, where you are, the time of year and potentially even the weather on the day of the visit.*’ It’s important to encourage children’s contact with nature across all seasons and weather types, but given our increasingly extreme weather, under climate change, and the trend towards wetter winters in Scotland, the impact of year-round outdoor play activities may be becoming greater.

Davis *et al* (Play England/ NCB 2009) argue that ‘*The introduction of nature play can improve biodiversity and consequently improve children’s and young people’s interaction with nature through play.*’ This is debatable. Despite the very clear benefits that outdoor play in natural sites affords to children and young people, there is the risk that the impact of children’s play in outdoor areas can risk damaging the very biodiversity that is such an important feature of these sites. With the rise in interest in supporting children’s play outdoors, this is becoming an issue across Scotland, the UK and overseas.

Davis *et al* (2009) do concede that ‘*Play spaces that incorporate natural features may be more complex to maintain than fixed equipment sites.*’ Likewise, Browning *et al* (2013) noted that in parks providing nature play areas in eastern USA, these features are ‘*an emerging recreational challenge for protected area managers.*’ In their study they note that:

- ‘*Play occurs commonly in informal child-created (46%) and formal manager-created (29%) sites.*
- *Some type of environmental damage occurs 33% of the time that children are playing in nature.*
- *Measurable impacts include vegetation trampling, soil exposure, and tree and shrub damage.*’

This research has demonstrated that such places can recover given time. When these places are perhaps the only local greenspace a nursery can access, however, the question is how to reduce the impact? In some cases, the site owner or manager may refuse use of the site because of wear and tear.



### **The debate around conservation and nature play**

The education and conservation management programmes for Barnes Common, a designated nature reserve in England, *'adopts a strong policy of working with the seasons to minimise impact, awareness of nesting times, and aim to give the land time to heal. We provide ongoing training and information and encourage a sense of responsibility and respect for everyone – and everything – that shares these spaces.'* Under the guidelines for weekly term-time school and nursery visits, Richmond Council are not permitting any more Forest Schools to be established in the Barnes Common area owing to site wear and tear. On the other hand, trampling by children has been observed to keep bracken and bramble down (Friends of Barnes Common, April 2019). In such cases children can have the same browsing/ trampling/ground poaching effect as animals like deer, wild boar, or free ranging livestock.

Conservation concerns about the impacts of nature play are widespread, but the [Pennsylvania Land Trust Association](#) argues that conservation rules can have *'unintentional impacts.'*

*They argue 'Children need wild places to play in, to explore, to manipulate, and to fall in love with. While they are doing so, they will damage the resource. They will chase away wildlife, pull leaves off branches, dig holes, step on ants, muddy streams, throw rocks in ponds, whack sticks against tree trunks, collect feathers, pull the wings off beetles, erode steep creek banks, nail boards onto trees, and who knows what else. Yet if 1,000 children do this at a natural area for 100 years, they will almost certainly cause less ecological harm than a single bulldozer will do in 60 minutes as it clears a nearby site. In fact, they will probably do less ecological harm than was done creating the driveway, parking lot or trail for public access to the natural area. The point here is one of perspective. Children's nature play rarely does a substantial degree of ecological damage. Obviously, there are places where such play should be prohibited, like in a patch of endangered orchids or in a formal rose garden at the local horticultural center. But in most locations nature play will cause only minimal harm in any true ecological sense.'*

They go on to suggest...

*'Don't rule out nature play where its ecological impacts will be minor. A few natural sites have approached this with a simple zoning system: a small amount of land is designated for active play and educational use; the bulk of the site is open for visitor access under typical protective rules; and perhaps a special portion is completely off-limits due to the presence of sensitive species or landforms. Thoughtful trail design, effective signage, and good visitor maps can help support this zoning approach.'*

Accepting unlimited use by groups might be sustainable in large tracts of land where zoning is possible. Browning *et al* (2013) also suggest that the *'societal benefits of unstructured play in nature may outweigh the environmental costs.'* Urban green spaces however, are usually small and fragmented, and are more vulnerable to frequent heavy use. The challenge lies in balancing the care of urban greenspace sites with a high population pressure, and a growing demand for natural play provision.

The size of groups and frequency of use is a major consideration. The Senior Countryside Ranger for Glasgow City Council, Allison Grieg, notes that *'over decade of managing forest school use across 15 Glasgow sites, has shown that a maximum of 12 children per group*

*decreases footfall to a level that is sustainable if the camp is not used more than twice per week' (A.Grieg, pers.comm. 7/3/20)*

Laura Jane Blackie (Countryside Ranger, Dundee City Council Environment Department) also recognises these issues, commenting '*I'd say it's a very overlooked aspect of the increase in use of small urban green spaces for outdoor education'* (Laura Jane Blackie, 2020 pers.comm. 06/02/20).

Similar issues can affect established sites used by settings like Mindstretchers' [Auchlone Nature Kindergarten](#). Kate Hookham (former) Senior Trainer, Co-ordinator Living Classrooms, Mindstretchers Ltd. commented that '*We also have some past evidence of impact and we do manage surfaces with bark chip and alternating routes of travel. As we know with environmental management it's the honeypot vs spread the load dilemma'*. (Kate Hookham, Senior Trainer, Co-ordinator Living Classrooms, Mindstretchers Ltd. pers.comm. 13/1/20)

### **Access to sites**

Outdoor & Woodland Learning Scotland offer [Landowner Guidance](#), which has been revised and updated under this report.

The [Scottish Outdoor Access Code](#) (SOAC) describes how '*The Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003 ensures everyone has statutory access rights to most of Scotland's outdoors, if these rights are exercised responsibly, with respect for people's privacy, safety and livelihoods, and for Scotland's environment. Equally, land managers have to manage their land and water responsibly in relation to access rights.'*

SOAC guidance on [Responsible behaviour by teachers and outdoor educators](#), includes advice to groups to '*contact the relevant land manager(s) in advance'*, and to encourage land managers to provide consent for activities requested '*if your concerns or those of others can be properly addressed'*.

However, since this was applied in Scotland, some groups and local authority landowner/managers have interpreted SOAC as signalling that there is no requirement for groups to apply for permission to use sites. Assuming group access comes under 'responsible access', the procedure for issuing Permission to Use (PTUs) has been abandoned. In contrast, Allison Grieg Senior Countryside Ranger Glasgow City Council, argues strongly for the need for PTUs. (A.Grieg, 2020 pers.comm, 7/2/20).

### **Glasgow City Council approach following the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003**

"The citywide parks management rules were revised to embody the ethos of responsible access, but we recognised this 'right to roam' and free access newly enshrined in Law was for individuals not organised groups or businesses. Groups and business wishing to use Glasgow parks would still be managed through the permission to use process, which allowed us to manage sustainable the numbers and frequency of groups in any particular location...so avoiding conflict between groups and ensuring site and biodiversity integrity. In order to do this, we have a city-wide calendar of forest school sites, and book groups/nurseries into each day and camps, allowing an overview of who is where at any given time. A simple one-page Guidance for use (supplied) was prepared by the Countryside ranger around 10 years ago and

small updates have made over the years, and this is issued alongside PTU letter and Conditions of Let. There is currently no fee under the PTU system for using a FS site on the premise that no charge is being levied. Where a business is charging customers a General Lease agreement is drawn up.

Allison Grieg, 2020 *pers.comm*, 7/3/20

The Code advises groups to take extra care when organising an event or running a business, and recommends:

- contacting the relevant land managers if you are organising an educational visit to a farm or estate;
- obtaining the permission of the relevant land managers if your event needs facilities or services, or is likely, to an unreasonable extent, to hinder land management operations, interfere with other people enjoying the outdoors or affect the environment;
- talking to the land managers who are responsible for places that you use regularly or intensively.

(See [Scottish Outdoor Access Code Public access to Scotland's outdoors Your rights and responsibilities](#) paras. 3.57 – 3.59)

The above advice would reasonably apply to outdoor nursery and kindergarten groups, and for the landowner/ manager to provide Permission to Use notices provided the site can accommodate the group activities. This is where understanding the carrying capacity of any site becomes critical.

Requests to use sites suitable for outdoor learning and play in urban areas has increased dramatically over the past decade. Ten years ago, Glasgow City Council senior ranger had not issued any Permissions to Use (PTUs) for Forest School programmes. Requests since then have increased rapidly, most notably around four years ago when the ELC expansion targets were announced, although private and partner provider nurseries were 'ahead of the curve' in terms of interest in outdoor sites.

Previously, PTUs were administered by the Glasgow City Council events team, but the Senior Countryside Ranger is now managing these, to oversee the programme (with 18 Forest School sites cross the city) and to ensure the carrying capacity for each site is maintained. The PTU allocates a mapped site with the operating conditions. Forest School sites are designated, bookable sites (Pollok Country Park has one designated Forest School site), whereas campsites are not designated and are more informal (although still require a PTU). (A. Grieg, 2020 *pers.comm*, 7/2/20).

PTUs can act as the checks and balance to ensure care of urban greenspaces, and the safety of groups outdoors. The Senior Countryside Ranger cited an example of one nursery, whose leaders had little or no understanding of site sustainability, continuing to overuse and mistreat a site. As a result, their PTU was revoked. As a result, PTUs for other groups have not been renewed, until shared sustainable use of the overall site can be resolved.

Differing responsibilities for site management may also determine site quality and sustainability. Unlike the formal parks in Glasgow, Castlemilk Woods are managed through the housing estate

operational team, through the capital budget. This means a more 'as and when' support from the Countryside Ranger team (Allison Grieg, 2020 *pers.comm*, 7/2/20).

The local community is also a key stakeholder, and needs to be brought on side at an early stage. Local people often have a sense of ownership of their local greenspace, and this may conflict with use by other groups. Minibus/ coach access by groups can also exacerbate tensions. Conflict with local residents around access by group minibuses, was one of several challenging factors in Auchinairn OSC group's use of their local greenspace, despite working closely with the community police officers (Gwen McLaren 2020, *pers.comm*, 17/1/20).

The Glasgow City Council Senior Countryside Ranger described how permitted use of Dawsholm Nature Reserve by the outdoor kindergarten group led to tensions with the local community, who had concerns about noise and environmental degradation. Public education is needed to share the requirements of different stakeholders and the benefits of children having access to nature, with some adjustments on both sides. For example, the kindergarten group now avoids areas near housing at Dawsholm Nature Reserve. (Allison Grieg, 2020 *pers.comm*, 7/2/20).

See:

APPENDIX 3 for a Glasgow City Council Countryside Rangers Sample PTU letter

APPENDIX 4 for Glasgow City Council Countryside Rangers Guidance for use

APPENDIX 5 provides an example of Glasgow City Council Countryside Rangers Map of camps and rotation

### **Site selection**

A Forest Kindergarten site appraisal form is provided in Appendix 2, [Out to Play](#) (p84). This comprehensive guidance encourages potential site users to consider a range of elements under: access, site character, vegetation, potential hazards (including potential hazards on beaches), and owner/ site manager details, with space for notes.

Privacy of sites was a key consideration used by the Countryside Rangers to select 'dedicated' forest school sites across Glasgow. Where fires were permitted, a secluded site keeps the smoke literally under wraps (see also the Woodland Outdoor Kindergarten case study). If discovered, these camps in urban parks become regular haunts and abused by less welcome park users for drinking and drugs. Privacy helps to safeguard a camp from abuse, keeping children safer and meaning less need for clear up and site checks before children arrive. (A. Grieg, *pers.comm*. 7/3/20)

The ecological quality of a site, in particular the ground flora, should determine its suitability for use by groups. Sites which have been continuously wooded for at least the past 400 years are described as Ancient Woodland. The Woodland Trust for example, assess their ancient woodland sites more carefully for impacts than their secondary woodland sites (Phil Gordon, WTS, *pers.comm*. 2020)

## Management and maintenance of sites

Browning et al (2013) note that for nature play areas '*Sustainable management requires appropriate site selection, development, and maintenance*'.

Davis et al (2009) detail the following procedures which could be used to support the maintenance of play spaces:

- maintenance plans and schedules
- risk–benefit assessments
- inspection programmes
- maintenance records
- evaluation and review

Trees and low branches offer children great opportunities for swinging and climbing. *Nature play: Maintenance guide* notes that '*A local authority may wish to use the risk–benefit assessment to help them come to a decision about monitoring tree climbing, and this could be reviewed once a year or more frequently if there were a change in situation*'.

Allison Grieg, Senior Countryside Ranger, Glasgow City Council, described how good communication between the landowner/ manager and user groups helped negotiations with an outdoor kindergarten group who were using trees and shrubs for climbing on within Pollok Country Park. She agreed with the kindergarten group leader that the children could continue to climb among the more robust rhododendrons (which offer great low horizontal branches for play), but they should not climb on the yew trees, to avoid further bark damage (Allison Grieg, 2020 *pers.comm*, 7/2/20).

This type of arrangement highlights the need to develop good relationships between land managers and groups. Land managers also need to have management in place that is sensitive to the needs of the local community as well as wildlife. Children can cause damage to tree bark, but so can un-controlled numbers of grey squirrels, and deer.

All local authorities have a duty to maintain biodiversity. If ELC and education groups are using urban greenspace for outdoor learning and play, it's vital that estate/ grounds maintenance contractors are aware of this and any herbicide use is limited. In Dundee, Community Allotments Officer, Kate Treharne was concerned to discover in a community greenspace (used by the local school) that that '*understorey is cleared (or 'cleaned' as they call it) and any regrowth kept down with herbicide. Every grass edge and mature tree is sprayed around*' however she follows on to say that '*...they have stopped over the last couple of years.*' As well as safety concerns over glyphosate use, a 'clean' surface under trees is detrimental to local biodiversity and reduces the quality of the environment for outdoor learning and play. (Kate Treharne, Community Allotments Officer, Dundee City Council *pers.comm*. 10.2.20).

It is important to highlight here that sustainable use of sites may also be under increasing threat as Council and ranger staff numbers are reduced. Glasgow City Council has lost 50% of its Countryside Ranger team, from 14 to 7 posts. This undoubtedly limits opportunities to establish positive relationships, and manage the carrying capacity of our urban outdoor spaces.

### Woodland management information online

A range of useful online resources are available which can support practitioner knowledge on woodland management and the sustainable use of sites:

Royal Forestry Society provides [guidance for woodland owners](#).

This includes advice such as:

*'The best way really to get to know your wood is to ask an expert to do a survey. This can then lead to a management plan, which will suggest the most appropriate activities for your wood'*

(P6 Section 1. Getting to know your woodland)

Section 6 biodiversity

*'A change in management can similarly have detrimental effects on biodiversity –this is usually when management shifts to large-scale, uniform operations that cause a loss of structural diversity. '.....Grazing and browsing pressures can also lead to simplification of field and shrub layers, and a lack of structure.'*

*'The key to managing open space habitat is to not manage everything at the same time.'*

This guidance includes a section on managing deadwood. Forest Research offers a range of guidance and publications including [Public engagement in forestry toolbox and guidance](#).

Three toolkits include the booklet [Public Engagement and Forestry: Key Lessons for Working in Urban Areas](#). This

- Discusses the key engagement challenges in urban areas
- Suggests some of the most appropriate tools to use
- Provides examples of urban forestry engagement processes in Scotland, England and Wales.

The Royal Forestry Society has developed a [Knowledge Hub](#) and are *'developing a range of resources to assist with care and management of woodlands, including decision support tools.'*

The Sylva Foundation's ['My Forest'](#) provides online tools and resources for woodland management) including for educators. This includes [My Forest for Education](#)

*'My Forest for Education is an easy-to-use and free online application that enables any educator, or young person, to generate straightforward woodland management plans, maps and ecological impact assessments for woodland sites and school grounds.'*

## SUPPORTING GOOD PRACTICE OUTDOORS

### The need to develop ecological skills in practitioners

The American environmentalist Aldo Leopold once said *"If you learn to read the land, I have no fear what you will do to the land."* (quote sourced from Rasmussen and Voth, 2001).

Many group leaders come from a background in child pedagogy; however, their ecological understanding including woodland management, plant and wildlife identification skills may be weak. They may also lack knowledge of safe practice outdoors (e.g. canopy checks) although site risk benefit assessment is embedded in training courses like Forest School.

Glasgow City Council provides a good local authority model in its long-term support of outdoor learning programmes. In 2012, Education Services launched Outside Now!, Glasgow's outdoor learning strategy, described in this [GCC Outdoor Learning Strategy Update \(2014\)](#). Each school



was provided with £2k to buy outdoor equipment and access training (Allison Grieg, 2020 *pers.comm*, 7/2/20). This included funding to the Jeely Piece Club for 6 Castlemilk schools to receive a full day for each class in Castlemilk woodlands.

Outdoor equipment alone does not support sustainable practice. Key to the sustainable use of sites are the skills and knowledge of outdoor educators and group leaders. Countryside Rangers can also offer tailored training. In Glasgow, the Senior Ranger ensured that teachers were paired with a countryside ranger as a 'learning buddy', to share skill sets and Forest School courses were delivered to schools.

In addition, concerned that some children may be at risk in outdoor programmes if potentially toxic plants are not recognised, the Senior Countryside Ranger, Glasgow City Council, decided to run evening training sessions on plant identification to build group leader skills (Allison Grieg, 2020 *pers.comm*, 7/2/20).

Similarly, the manager at Auchinairn OSC agreed that she and her staff, despite having undertaken Forest School training, would benefit from additional training in understanding ecology and plant identification (Gwen McLaren 2020, *pers.comm*, 17/1/20)

Skill development should start with the trainee teacher/ ELC practitioner. Deborah Meechan is a Forest School Leader and Lecturer in [Early Learning and Childcare at Glasgow Clyde College](#) and has undergone both Forest School L3 and Forest Kindergarten training. She values both courses, and feels while Forest School provides the deeper experience and outdoor philosophy, particularly in terms of health and well-being for participants, Forest Kindergarten provides a good start for ELC practitioners. She is now introducing the Forest Kindergarten award to HNC Level 7 student teachers at Glasgow Clyde College, and students in child centred outdoor play. The aim is to develop robust and resilient outdoor practitioners, which can be challenging with a generation of students who may have very little outdoor experience from their own childhoods. She is currently working with students at the Cardonald campus, and developing courses for students based at the Anniesland and Langside campuses. She is also delivering a (non-assessed) Forest School programme with a small cohort of students, volunteering in their study time. This is having a restorative effect in connecting or reconnecting students with nature, and leading to better academic outcomes.

### **Practice guidance in training courses**

Outdoor practitioners come with different skill sets, depending on their background. There is no specific requirement for teachers to undergo any specialised training before taking groups outdoors for play or learning, and supporting children's health and wellbeing. Often what is simply needed for outdoor pedagogy is confidence rather than specific skills. Other types of group leader, such as Countryside Rangers, will have good environmental knowledge and know their sites well. However, there are a range of training courses that can help to provide additional skills for outdoor educators, add depth to the experience and may to different degrees address the issue of sustainable sites use. Some of these training courses or programmes include Forest School, which is well established and delivered by a range of organisations and companies, and the more recent [Forest and Outdoor Learning Award \(FOLA\)](#) developed by Newbattle Abbey College.

[Forest School Training Co \(FSTC\)](#) provide all levels of Forest School training. Their approach is to address site management as an on-going part of the experience of training for a period of



time on same site. They look at ecology and barriers to ecology, and share simple effective techniques for limiting effects, for monitoring effects of site use over time, and feeding results back into ongoing management plan. Forest School Level 5 trainees are required to demonstrate understanding on the training site, Level 6s are required to apply their understanding on the sites where they assist, and Level 8s are required to create and apply a management plan including impact assessment, control actions and monitoring and evaluation. This is marked formatively and constructively during training, including at delivery assessment where the trainers visit their site. (Aline Hill, *pers.comm.* 25. 2.20)

Within the [Forest and Outdoor Learning Award \(FOLA\)](#) training, Patrick Boxall at Newbattle Abbey College confirms that some materials are provided online, but the FOLA course includes various policies and approaches in relation to sustainable management of sites. Key ones include:

- Site use forms to manage access and liability
- Increased numbers of designated Forest Learning sites and seasonal rotation to manage impact and access
- Monitoring site impacts
- Including all stakeholders, especially local community, in site management. Such as through the Midlothian OWL group, volunteers, local groups and the council.
- Communication of rationale for site use to community
- Engagement with national networks such as Outdoor & Woodland Learning (OWL) Scotland and the National Network for Outdoor Learning (NNOL).

(Patrick Boxall, *pers.comm.* 25.2.20)

[Forest School Training Co \(FSTC\)](#) also deliver The Forest and Outdoor Learning Course and confirm that this covers how to evaluate the impact of common Forest School activities and how to minimise this impact. Students use this information to feed into a management plan for their site and must also incorporate how they could improve the biodiversity on their site. The management plan covers a period of three years. (Mike Brady, *pers.comm.* 25.2.20)

[Mindstretchers](#) have developed materials to cover the assessment criteria on ecology and Environmental Impact assessment (EIA) / sustainable management planning for Forest School. They have developed an online/[hybrid Forest School](#) course which includes a specific module on ecology. (Kate Hookham, Senior Trainer, Co-ordinator Living Classrooms, Mindstretchers Ltd. *pers.comm.* 13/1/20)

Supporting informal training, Outdoor & Woodland Learning Scotland have a valuable network of local groups who can offer workshops and training events. For example, the Glasgow Outdoor & Woodland Learning Group (GROWL) provides [networking and learning events](#) for outdoor educators based in Glasgow.

The Royal Forestry Society offers a good model through its Teaching Trees [Outdoor Learning Training \(Cambium Network\)](#). Its Level 3 module 'Co-ordinating an Outdoor Curriculum' includes 'Site planning and sustainable management of your own ground'.

Thus, there is evidence of good practice shared within training courses, but it is questionable whether this is currently shared widely enough to reach all practitioners.

## Guidance for ELC and other practitioners

There is a strong case to be made for children to be engaged with the concept of caring for their environment from a very young age, as described in this article in The Guardian [Sustainability must begin in the nursery](#) (30th January 2020).

Referring to Mindstretchers [Auchlone Nature Kindergarten](#), Kate Hookham (formerly Senior Trainer, Co-ordinator Living Classrooms, Mindstretchers Ltd) said '*quite some time ago we did a 'save our grass' campaign with the children. I think I have that in our landscape floorbook....*' (pers.comm. 13/1/20). The [floorbook approach](#) developed by Mindstretchers may be a useful tool to develop children's thinking around caring for their environment.

The relationship between child, adult and environment is crucial to develop an ethos of care. '*Exploring the natural environment goes a long way in teaching sustainability if children are supported by adults who demonstrate care and who model environmental stewardship. Enjoying and learning about how to use their greenspace responsibly and safely, looking after the place and experiencing seasonal changes all help to encourage a connection between children and nature. It can actively encourage a child to consider other users and future generations.*' ([Out to Play](#), section 6.1, 2018).

The document [Out to Play](#) (2018) is a 'how-to' guide providing step-by-step, practical advice to help nursery settings, childminders, schools and out of school care settings who seek to utilise local greenspace to enhance children's learning. This guidance is most easily navigated online through the Scottish Government webpage [Out To Play](#) but is also available as the downloadable PDF document [Out To Play](#).

The key sections in [Out to Play](#) relevant to sustainable management of sites are under [Section 06: Using Your Space](#) in particular [6.4 Environment](#) and [Appendix 3](#). Suggested additions/amendments to this list is shown in APPENDIX 2, based on the findings in this report.

What is missing is any suggested site monitoring for groups to assess the impact they are having on the site they are using. Fixed-point photographic monitoring may provide a simple visual assessment for land managers and group leaders, and this should be included as a component for training group leaders on site ecology, management and use.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1. Develop positive relationships between user and landowner /manager.** Make sure there are agreed points over how the area should be managed.
- 2. Support use of sites by children in early year and learning groups.** This can help to reduce antisocial behaviour by adding value to this place within the wider community. Groups show care for their site through leaving no trace and litter picking. Good practice involves the children and is modelled by adults.
- 3. Provide additional learning for practitioners on essential ecology** to help with site stewardship site, including how to identify plants and animals. In turn knowledgeable practitioners can engage children in this process. Simple nature identification charts should be available during site sessions, and group members can record and take photographs during site sessions, site monitoring and clean-ups. Engaging with Award Schemes like the John Mui

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Award can also provide a framework for adding value, understanding and knowledge. This might include citizen science activities.

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## APPENDIX 1: Summary of Case Studies, with key learning points

### Top three key learning points:

- 1. Develop positive relationships between user and landowner /manager.** Make sure there are agreed points over how the area should be managed.
- 2. Use by children in early year and learning groups can help to reduce antisocial behaviour by adding value to the site within the wider community.** Groups show care for their site through leaving no trace and litter picking. Good practice involves the children and is modelled by adults.
- 3. Additional learning for practitioners on essential ecology** will help with the stewardship of the site, including how to identify plants and animals. Children should be engaged in this process. For example, simple field identification charts are available during site sessions, or participants are encouraged to record and take photographs of what interests them. This might include citizen science activities.

### AUCHINAIRN OUT OF SCHOOL CARE, BISHOPBRIGGS

*Private woodland on the outskirts of Bishopbriggs, managed by Galbraith, a property services company, on behalf of Caledonian Estate, and leased to Auchinairn Out of School Care for after school Forest School sessions.*

- Private sites can provide a solution for groups seeking locally accessible quality green spaces, if a good relationship can be established with the owner/ manager, and with agreed positive outcomes for all parties.
- Education/ use of sites by groups can help reduce fly tipping and other antisocial behaviour, through increased vigilance, monitoring and perceived community value.
- The manager at Auchinairn OSC agreed that she and her staff, despite having undertaken Forest School training, would benefit from additional training in understanding ecology and plant identification. This would help them monitor any ecological impacts on site.

### BISHOP LOCH, EASTERHOUSE WOODS

*One of 5 sites comprising the Easterhouse woods, owned by Glasgow City Council, and managed by Forestry & Land Scotland (FLS). The woodlands are used by a wide range of play, education and community groups.*

- Long term, there is a need for managers to consider sustainable use of sites, but currently temporary fixes using sacrificial sites can relieve pressure on other areas with greater ecological value.
- Alternative sites start in good condition but through use are likely to attract possible unwanted attention and anti-social behaviour. The less visible they are from main public

paths the better. All sites allocated to groups may have to be considered 'sacrificial' over time.

- Increasing pressure on land management staff and increasing demand for sites invariably makes sustainable site management more challenging.

### **CASTLEMILK WOODLANDS**

*Owned and managed by Glasgow City Council/ Castlemilk Park volunteers. The site is used by a wide range of education and community groups, and in particular the neighbourhood nurseries represented on the Castlemilk Partnership Steering Group.*

- The Community Woodland Officer works in very close collaboration with the local community, to bring people on board. Including nurseries and similar settings on the Park steering group helps to manage expectations and sustainable use.
- Anti-social behaviour is reduced when there is more visible use of the woodland by nursery and other community groups.
- Forest School training has supported the Community Woodland Officer in his practice, and some settings, but the time and cost commitment required by the FS L3 Leader award has been a deterrent for other ELC settings. This means some nurseries are using the site with a limited outdoor skill set, and don't always operate Leave No Trace practice.
- The Forest School focus on bush craft rather than plant identification skills may be less appropriate for ELC settings. The activity focus might be better shifted to care and management of outdoor sites.
- Organisations that advertise 'free Forest School' sessions or outdoor events can create a honeypot effect on sites and increase impacts, increasing competition for the spaces used by the local Castlemilk community. Site promotion needs careful consideration and management.
- New Green Infrastructure sites nearby might offer alternative sites for ELC setting outdoors, and reduce pressure on sites with high demand like Castlemilk Woodlands.

### **CLYDE COLLEGE/POLLOK PARK**

*Owned and managed by Glasgow City Council. This fragment of the Country Park is used by Glasgow Clyde College (Cardonald campus) to deliver Forest School sessions to HNC Level 7 Childhood Practice students.*

- Understanding the ecology of the woodland site and possible environmental impacts can be a steep learning curve for some students, if they have little outdoor experience.
- Students are encouraged to show care and a sense of stewardship for their outdoor site, collecting and removing litter, to leave sites in a better condition than before.
- Contact with nature for students can benefit their health and wellbeing, as well as improve their outdoor skills and quality of their practice.



- Sharing the experience and benefits of this outdoor learning programme for students within the College Regional Board, with key local authority and Scottish Government leaders, and with international visitors, has raised the profile of these programmes, and promoted the benefits of developing outdoor play and learning skills among ELC students with the wider tertiary education community.
- Winning hearts and minds are the keys to success. Students need to believe in the value of the Forest Kindergarten and outdoor play approach, otherwise quality provision can be compromised.

## **WOODLAND OUTDOOR KINDERGARTENS**

*Owned and managed by Glasgow City Council, and used by a wide range of education and community groups, and in particular Woodland Outdoor Kindergartens - private partner provider outdoor nursery.*

- Establish regular conversations and develop trust from the outset between the site user and site manager.
- As part of good practice, settings should agree a Site/ Woodland Impact Policy with the land manager which considers areas of historical significance, ecological significance or archaeological significance, training requirements of staff to meet these needs, total number of groups and participants, number of agreed sites, frequency of use and how these are used (e.g. on rotation basis/ time of year), and a review date for this policy.
- The most sustainable way to access sites, on foot or public transport, is not always an option for some urban settings who require quality outdoor sites for play, and have to accommodate parents' needs for convenient drop off points.
- A robust system of Permission to Use with a Leave No Trace operating principle should underpin site use. This should have a paper trail and a diary of bookings.
- Experience over a decade of managing Forest School use across 15 Glasgow sites has shown that a maximum of 12 children per group decreases footfall to a level that is sustainable if the camp is not used more than twice per week.
- Site soil structure and waterlogging can make some sites unsustainable for continual use by groups, especially in winter.
- Planned rotational use across a large site using agreed camps can reduce pressure on individual areas and allow some recovery of vegetation.
- Use of fire and formal tools is not an essential component of good quality early years outdoor play – this is a key message for outdoor early years groups
- Woodland management plans should be in place, to include use by outdoor kindergarten groups, just as the presence of herbivores such as grey squirrel and deer have to be taken

into account. For example, bark damage on trees can be caused by both grey squirrels and children playing, but training here can help to distinguish the two types of pressure.

- Accept that impacts on localised areas can be balanced against the great benefits playing outdoors in nature confers to children, and which may help them to value and care for their environment now and in future.

## APPENDIX 2 OUT TO PLAY GOOD PRACTICE NOTES SUGGESTED AMENDMENTS

Suggested additions/ amendments in **bold** to [Appendix 3](#) 'good practice notes' in [Out to Play](#) based on the findings in this report.

See also the Sylva Foundation's [Forest School Impact Assessment Guide](#)

Leave Less Trace Nature Play Principles (adapted from Matthew Browning's work)

- **Build good relationships between education/ play groups, landowners/ managers and the local community**
- **Check with landowner/ manager if Permission to Use is required, and site use criteria to agree and follow.**
- **Carry out litter pick before (checking for any hazardous materials) and after each session on site, involving the children/ young people where it is safe to do so.**

### Prepare to Play

- Play in small groups – avoid large numbers on a site or break into smaller groups.
- Wear sensible outdoor clothes.
- Avoid littering – go for litter-free snacks and take home all scraps of food waste.
- Go to the toilet in the designated space and follow the Scottish Outdoor Access Code

### Build and Dig with Care

- Build dens in places that aren't really fragile - for example, in sand, rock, gravel, grass, and snow
- Build with sticks found on the ground - not on trees
- **Leave selected areas of lying deadwood undisturbed as wildlife habitat.**
- Dig holes - but fill them in afterwards
- **Agree boundaries with the children around sensitive no dig zones**
- Remember that trees are alive - hugs are great but cuts and breaks are painful!
- **Discuss and agree with landowner/ manager if it is better to import materials for certain activities e.g. untreated wood for fire or tool use.**

### Respect Things you Find in Nature

- **Develop wildlife identification skills – including wild plants/ fungi/ trees/ invertebrates, and knowledge of any toxic species – and share and develop knowledge within your group.**
- Ask adults what's safe to handle
- Start a small nature collection - bring a favourite object home and leave the rest. Not everything is okay to take. **If children collect natural objects encourage them to leave materials on site to find again when they return.**
- Build a large "virtual" collection - take photos of lots of objects!
- Climb trees branches bigger than your wrist
- Find which trees are okay to climb. Some are more fragile than others.
- Let plants stay at home – avoid moving them and their seeds from one area to another.
- Try to only pick common wildflowers, berries and fungi. Only pick one or two even if there is a lot around.

- **Agree non-disturbance zones around sensitive vegetation like native bulbs, particularly in winter/ early spring when they can't be seen.**
- Find out if there are any invasive plant species which are safe to pick and play with. **Avoid playing with invasive species if this can spread them (e.g. popping Himalayan Balsam seeds).**
- Find out if there's any plants you can help grow. **Find out if your group can get involved in any local conservation activities with the local countryside ranger service, 'Friends of' groups, and the John Muir Award or similar schemes.**

#### Be Nice to Animals

- **Check with the landowner/ manager/ wildlife expert to agree non-disturbance/ no go areas; for example, badger setts.**
- **Help children learn to identify animal homes and special plants. Agree a plan with the children to avoid damaging plants and disturbing wildlife.**
- Gently catch minibeasts, frogs and toads with hands or nets.
- Keep hands wet when handling toads and other amphibians.
- Return captured animals to where you found them.
- Remember that people food is not good for animals.
- Make homes for wildlife and then leave them in peace so the animals move in. **Help enhance areas with poor structural diversity by building and putting up bat/ bird boxes and create invertebrate homes in consultation with your local wildlife group or countryside ranger.**

#### Remember You're Playing in A Special Place

- **Agree designated routes in and out of the site. In some cases, divert or create new paths, or stick to the same route in and out if vegetation is fragile and to maintain site privacy, in agreement with the landowner/ manager.**
- **Consider woodchip paths to reduce soil erosion but avoid imported woodchips to maintain biosecurity in environmentally sensitive sites.**
- Treat others as you would like to be treated.
- Return rocks, logs, and moss to where you found them – they are plant and animal homes!
- Remove any mud clods from wellies before paddling in a stream.
- Use scarves or other protection to minimise bark damage from use of ropes or hammocks.
- Agree the boundary of the main area to be used.



**Executive Director**  
George Gillespie

**Neighbourhoods & Sustainability**  
Glasgow City Council  
Exchange House  
231 George Street  
Glasgow G1 1RX

Ask for  
Phone Direct  
Fax Direct

**Countryside Rangers**  
**0141 287 9001**

Date

**Dear Applicant**

**PERMISSION TO USE – FOREST SCHOOL SITES AT SPECIFIED GLASGOW PARK (Top Woods Camp)**

Further to our recent communication and my site visit, I have pleasure in confirming that permission for you to run a Forest School programme at the above site (camps as per map & rota) has been granted on the following dates :-

**Daily, Mon 5<sup>th</sup> to Thurs 8<sup>th</sup> August 2019, 10am – 3pm**

Permission to use this Forest School **is granted for above dates only**, subject to your compliance in full with

- General Conditions of Let for Glasgow Parks and open spaces (sign and return by post)
- Guidance on best practice (also attached)

and any conditions of restrictions imposed by Neighbourhoods & Sustainability, personnel on site.

This permission to use, **does** also grant you **permission to light a fire as part of the forest school programme as you are a FS level 3 qualified trained leader**. In all other circumstances the Parks management rules prohibit the lighting of fires in Council parks and green spaces unless explicit permission granted by the Directorate.

Thank you for completing the General Condition of Let as confirmation of your agreement to observe same and please observe the Guidance for use and Leave no Trace approach. Please note that failure to do so would negate permission granted.

This letter should be available for inspection on site by Officers of Neighbourhoods & Sustainability, Glasgow City Council and Police Scotland. So please print off and bring with you on the day.

You will require to ensure that access and egress are kept open at all times for Council vehicles and of those of Emergency Services.

I trust you will find the foregoing in order. However, if you require further assistance please do not hesitate to contact Allison Greig, Senior Countryside Ranger on 0141 287 9001 or 07919 228 056

May I wish you continued success with your weekly Forest School Programme.

Yours sincerely

*PP A Greig*

Officer Name  
Events Manager

Encl.



OFFICIAL

# Glasgow's Forest School Sites

## Guidance for Use & Best Practise



1. First time users of the forest school site must undertake an orientation of the woodland with the local Countryside Ranger, contacts below.
2. Follow Leave no Trace guidelines for use of the site. Guidelines can be found at [www.lnt.org](http://www.lnt.org), or [www.leave-no-trace-training.co.uk](http://www.leave-no-trace-training.co.uk).
3. The FS group leader is responsible for dynamically risk assessing the camps on a daily basis, including the tree canopy.
4. Should you find the site to be in an unfit state for use on arrival please contact the local Countryside Ranger.
5. Designated Forest school sites within our woodlands will be rotated to offset permanent damage from trampling of ground flora and over use. Therefore the same site you have used in the past may not be in use in the future.
6. Frequency - a maximum of 2 bookings will be taken per camp, per week.
7. Seasonality - the sensitivity of site to disturbance and damage will differ accordingly to the location and time of year. Should a site become waterlogged, trampled, degraded or damaged in a short period of time, an alternative local site will be found to continue the sessions and fulfil your existing PTU booking.
8. Fires are not permitted in Council parks and greenspaces, under the terms of the management rules. Only if an official Permission to Use letter is accompanying these guidelines, is the applicant permitted to light fires.
9. Only Forest school level 3 (qualified) trained leaders with an official Permission to Use letter are permitted to oversee the lighting of fires.
10. An appropriate risk assessment should be provided in advance of use.
11. Wood must be brought in for burning and not harvested on site from the surrounding woodland. Wood must be untreated.
12. On the day conditions, such as wind direction and speed should be considered and factored into any risk assessment.
13. Compliance with the Scottish Outdoor Access Code. Information can be found at [www.outdooraccess-scotland.com](http://www.outdooraccess-scotland.com)
14. Permission will be revoked for future use if users do not follow these guidelines.

Mobile phone contact numbers for all Countryside Rangers in Glasgow organised by area, have been removed.

### Glasgow City Council Countryside Rangers Example of Map of camps and rotation

Summer Sessions Forest School PTU Dates August Mon-Fri 5th,6th,7th,8th 2019

