

# Supporting outdoor learning when budgets are tight

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chair of the Association of Heads of Outdoor Education Centres (AHOEC), considers how school leaders can identify opportunities for affordable outdoor learning.



**O**utdoor learning isn't a subject or a topic; it's a way of teaching. In one way or another, I think we all recognise the value and benefits of outdoor learning for our children and pupils. This may vary slightly for different schools and school leaders.

But the evidence now overwhelmingly supports the fact that well-planned, progressive, high-quality outdoor learning experiences can have a significantly positive impact on areas such as health and well-being, self-confidence and self-esteem, resilience, character development, enjoyment of learning, pupil progression, and behaviour and attendance.

The message is clear: getting children and young people outdoors to learn is fantastic, and it can set them on a pathway to happy, healthy and environmentally sustainable lifestyles. These benefits are being recognised by Ofsted, the UK Government's select committee on education and skills, local authorities and many others.

However, as school budgets come under increasing pressure, we need to dispel the myth that outdoor learning can only be delivered in wild open spaces by highly specialist providers often wearing a lot of fleeces. You can deliver outdoor learning to children and pupils in a number of different ways as well as on residential visits:

- On a regular basis in the school's grounds by teachers
- In areas within walking distance of the school using parks, woodland and green spaces
- On day visits to local outdoor learning providers.

A progressive outdoor learning curriculum would encompass all of these methods, and a coordinated approach to this can ensure a school is getting the absolute most out of it in terms of outcomes and benefits.

A simple outdoor learning policy will help to focus a school on the overall vision and purpose for using outdoor learning, and it can also join up all of the various outdoor learning experiences on offer. There are lots of resources to help you with this from an organisation called Learning Outside the Classroom (LOTc). For more information, visit [www.lotc.org.uk](http://www.lotc.org.uk).

As set out above, at a time of budget pressures, you may want to consider how to undertake a model of regular outdoor learning delivery in your school's grounds by teachers. This approach, if done well, is an affordable, inclusive, sustainable and effective way to achieve fantastic outdoor learning outcomes.

In 2016, Natural Connections published a report on a four-year research project delivered by Plymouth University called transforming schools through outdoor learning. This research looked at the best ways to support schools to understand the benefits of outdoor learning and how to embed it in the curriculum in a sustainable way. Learn more about the project by visiting [www.plymouth.ac.uk/research/oelres-net/transforming](http://www.plymouth.ac.uk/research/oelres-net/transforming).

It concluded that there are five key tools to the successful implementation of school-based, teacher-led outdoor learning:

- 1** Get the whole school on board with outdoor learning. Outdoor learning needs to be supported by senior leaders, governors, and a knowledgeable and enthusiastic outdoor learning lead who can inspire others
- 2** Collaboration and networking: create opportunities to meet and discuss ideas around outdoor learning with enthused, excited and inspired teachers from other schools
- 3** Develop your school's grounds and make use of local spaces for outdoor learning. You do not need extensive grounds to create engaging and exciting outdoor learning experiences. It is about looking at what you do have and making the most of it
- 4** Continuing professional development for staff is crucial. Teachers' confidence and skills can be major barriers to teaching outdoors, but there are excellent resources and training opportunities available to support teachers with this
- 5** Demonstrate successful learning when working outdoors by developing creative ways of evidencing and evaluating outdoor learning lessons.

Competing pressures mean that opportunities for children and young people to value and enjoy nature and the outdoor environment are under threat, and yet all of the evidence shows that it is hugely important. Having a whole-school approach that recognises the benefits and value of outdoor learning is a good starting point.

Find out how your pupils can start their adventure through high-quality outdoor learning by visiting [www.ahoec.org](http://www.ahoec.org).



Looking for good teaching resources on outdoor learning? Visit [www.lotc.org.uk](http://www.lotc.org.uk).