



OUTDOOR & WOODLAND LEARNING SCOTLAND

GUIDANCE FOR LANDOWNERS

WOODLANDS FOR LEARNING

As a woodland owner, you can open up your woods for learning. This guidance provides summary information on the use of woodland for outdoor and woodland learning.

Playing and learning outdoors in nature confers great benefits to children, and may help them to value and care for their environment now and in future. Education/ use of sites by groups can help reduce fly tipping and other antisocial behaviour, through increased vigilance, monitoring and perceived community value.

In Scotland, demand for good quality outdoor sites is growing. Here, Learning for Sustainability (LfS) is an entitlement for all learners within Curriculum for Excellence, and outdoor learning is a fundamental part of LfS delivery. In addition, under the Scottish Government's expansion in Early Learning and Childcare in Scotland, a number of early learning and childcare settings require suitable sites to enhance their outdoor provision.

Outdoor & Woodland Learning Scotland aims to increase opportunities for learning outdoors and helps to deliver and promote outdoor and woodland education through a network of local OWL groups.

OWL local group members run a variety of outdoor and woodland education projects. These include professional development for teachers, green woodworking and crafts, outdoor workshops and programmes like Forest Kindergarten and Forest School, which offer children, young people and adults, regular opportunities to achieve, and develop confidence through outdoor play and experiential learning in a woodland environment.

What makes a good woodland site for learning?

The minimum required is an outdoor site with natural features including some trees and shelter, whether this is in an urban context or the wider countryside. However, the **ideal** setting for play and learning in the woods would have the following features:

- Be a well-managed broadleaved/ mixed woodland, with a diversity of smaller trees, shrubs, varied topography and open areas.
- Have good mobile 'phone reception in case of emergencies.
- Be accessible on foot, or public transport, to reduce your carbon footprint
- Have a clear access point at the entrance for emergency vehicles and an external parking/drop off point for educational transport if required.

- Have easy access within it plus opportunities to explore off the main paths.
- Have minimal public access, and no accessible open deep water nearby, though shallow puddles, ditches and streams for play and exploring add great value

An ideal site may not exist but you can work with the leader to find the best site.

What activities may take place?

Outdoor and woodland learning (OWL) aims to provide real life 'hands-on' experiences as these provide the most meaningful learning. Activities have minimal impact on the environment, and good practice aims to 'Leave-No-Trace', or have positive environmental benefits.

An OWL programme may involve the following:

- Simple investigation and exploration with minimal equipment, using natural materials as the learning resource.
- Playing games, using the woodland for inspiration for art and writing projects
- Using the woodland for numeracy – counting, sorting, measuring, estimating etc.
- Using simple tools to whittle and do craft work
- Simple rope work
- Developing areas with logs for informal seating, and fire sites to demonstrate fire safety, construction and campfire cooking. Use of portable fire bowls protects the woodland floor.
- Temporary shelters may be made with tarpaulins or woodland brush.

Local OWL group leaders understand that any activity should only take place with the prior agreement of the landowner/ land manager, and it is good practice to establish regular conversations and develop trust from the outset between the site user and site manager. Taking account of other community user needs is also vital.

Most outdoor learning and play activities leave no trace, and groups should operate to maintain or enhance the biodiversity of the site. However, if you have any concerns about planned activities, do discuss this with the group leader(s). Activities can be planned that support your woodland management, or can be avoided or relocated where there is concern.

See OWL Scotland guidance with case studies for practitioners and land managers on ['Sustainable management of sites for outdoor learning and play'](#).

LEGAL ASPECTS

Liability and Insurance

The legal position on liability is largely based on the Occupiers' Liability (Scotland) Act 1960 and common law, where an 'occupier' of land has a duty of care towards people on that land. The landowner must ensure the property is kept in a condition that is not likely to cause injury or damage to people on that land, whether or not they have permission to be there.

The landowner is not liable for willingly accepted risks taken by visitors pursuing activities on the land.

Woodland owners are advised to have public liability insurance cover. Local OWL groups and Forest School leaders should have public liability insurance cover for their client group and planned activities. In addition, if a charge is made for use of your property, you will need commercial liability insurance. If there is no charge, you should ask to see a copy of the local OWL group's current public liability insurance cover certificate.

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Risk Assessment

Risk assessment involves checking what potentially might cause harm (hazards) and setting precautions to minimise any associated risk. As a landowner, you should notify any visiting groups of any known hazards on your land. This might include – any open water, old rubbish dumps, disused wells/mine shafts. A woodland site used for education activities must be assessed by the OWL local group, Forest Kindergarten/ School or other group leaders in order to evaluate the hazards and risks they pose. Risk cannot be eliminated, and learning how to manage risk safely is part of the learning experience. However, good forest education practice must assess and manage risk to keep the level low. There is no additional requirement on the landowner to manage the risk associated with local OWL group activities since a risk assessment will be undertaken by the local OWL group, Forest School or other group leaders.

PRACTICAL ASPECTS

Safety

Teaching staff have ultimate responsibility for their pupils in any organised school party. The local OWL group, Forest School and other group leaders must have Health and Safety policies, Accident & Emergency procedures and an agreed code of behaviour with their groups. They are responsible for carrying out a site risk assessment for the health and safety of their group undertaking any planned activities on site. Forest education groups should operate under their local authority guidelines, the Health & Safety at Work Act 1974, and Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999, the regulations which introduce the principle of risk assessment. The Scottish Framework for Safe Practice in Off-site Visits provides useful guidance in the online resource [Going Out There](#).

Access

Guidance provided by the Scottish Outdoor Access Code (under the Land Reform (Scotland) Act, 2003) makes clear that the outdoors cannot be made risk-free and that people accessing land must act with care for their safety and that of others. In Scotland, everyone has the right to be on most land and inland water providing they act responsibly and do not take motorised vehicles on site. Whether you're in the outdoors or managing the outdoors, the key things are to:

- Take responsibility for your own actions
- Respect the interests of other people
- Care for the environment.

SOAC guidance on 'Responsible behaviour by teachers and outdoor educators', advises 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*'.

As a landowner, you can ask people to avoid routes while work is going on or to avoid particular activities if this causes serious or less obvious risks to arise. Otherwise, you have a responsibility to respect access rights, to act reasonably when asking people to avoid certain working areas, and to work with the local authority and other bodies to help integrate access and land management.

Local authorities may have Permission to Use procedures in place for groups wishing to access their land for regular play and education sessions. Private landowner or managers may decide to draw up a lease with the user group.

Responsibilities

Local OWL, Forest Kindergarten/ School and other groups have a responsibility to treat the environment with care and respect, and follow sustainable site management practice. A Leave No Trace operating principle should underpin site use.

As the site landowner or manager, you should inform groups on whether any part of the site is designated for its natural heritage, landscape or cultural interest, or has any other special features that they should be aware of. The Land Information Search is an online map-based search tool which provides details of land with protected characteristics.

Those running a local OWL group activity or Forest School programme must discuss their planned activities well in advance with the site landowner or manager and seek permission for use of the site. This is particularly important to avoid any conflict with any other planned activities on the land.

Private landowner or managers may decide have a code of conduct written into the lease agreement with the user group.

It is good practice for the land manager and the education group to agree a site/ woodland impact policy 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.

SOURCES OF ADDITIONAL ADVICE AND FUNDING

Forestry & Land Scotland, NatureScot or Historic Environment Scotland may be willing to help to set up local agreements between site landowners/ managers and those looking for a site for forest education. They can also offer advice on issues such as site location, safety, management, natural and cultural heritage designations and felling permissions.

The [OWL Scotland education programme manager](#) can help access grants, training and advice on project development.

REFERENCE SOURCES AND FURTHER INFORMATION

Organisations & resources

- [Outdoor & Woodland Learning Scotland](#) web pages provide links to [local OWL groups](#), learning resources, [Forest School](#) and [Forest Kindergarten](#) and other information.
- [Forestry and Land Scotland](#) (FLS) – manage Scotland’s forests for timber production, tourism and recreation, renewable energy, biodiversity, wildlife and heritage conservation, and [community](#) use. For some activities and projects not covered by the Scottish Outdoor Access Code (SOAC), groups may need to arrange a permission or an agreement with FLS; often this can be arranged directly with the local [Forest District](#) office.
- [Scottish Forestry](#) – the Scottish Government agency responsible for forestry policy, support and regulations. This includes guidance on [working with communities](#).

- The [Royal Highland Education Trust \(RHET\)](#) provides advice and information on rural issues, and good practice guidelines for working with children in the countryside.
- Education Scotland's National Improvement Hub provides a useful [summary of learning for sustainability resources](#), including outdoor learning.
- [Out to Play](#) (2018) provides practical guidance to support outdoor play experiences

Locating and finding out about sites

- Search the [Greenspace map](#) managed by Greenspace Scotland to find accessible recreational and leisure greenspace anywhere in Britain
- NatureScot's [Greenspace Map for Outdoor Learning](#) allows teachers, educators and others to quickly identify greenspaces close to their education establishment that may provide outdoor learning potential.
- Search Registers of Scotland [land register](#) for property information
- [Land Information Search](#) is an online map-based search tool which provides details of land with protected characteristics
- Ordnance Survey provides an online [explore near me](#) search facility

Access & codes of behaviour

- The [Scottish Outdoor Access Code](#) (SOAC) sets out in detail everyone's rights of responsible access and good practice for a wide range of activities, and provides additional advice to landowners/ managers.
- SOAC guidance on [Responsible behaviour by teachers and outdoor educators](#)
- [Paths for All](#) is a partnership of more than twenty national organisations committed to promoting walking for health and the development of multi-use path networks in Scotland. See also the PFA [Outdoor Access Design Guide](#).
- [Leave No Trace](#) operating principles

Safe practice

- Education Scotland [Managing Risk in Outdoor Learning](#)
- [Going Out There](#) – This Scottish Framework for Safe Practice in Off-site Visits has been developed in partnership by the Scottish Government, the Health and Safety Executive (HSE), the Scottish Advisory Panel for Outdoor Education (SAPOE), Education Scotland and the Association of Directors of Education, with input from other partners including voluntary organisations and providers.
- The Health and Safety Executive's [Five steps to risk assessment](#)
- [Woodland Trust Scotland Outdoor Learning Pack](#) includes useful information on risk assessment for the outdoor classroom.

Liability

- SOAC '[A Brief Guide to Occupiers' Legal Liabilities in Scotland in relation to Public Outdoor Access](#)' - a brief introductory outline of occupiers' liability in law in Scotland, in relation to public outdoor access.

- [Community Land Advisory Service Scotland](#) information and advice includes a Guide for Landowners: for owners and users of land for community benefit. Its FAQs guide also includes a reference to insurance.

Funding

SOAC information on [funding sources for access related projects](#)

Visit the OWL Scotland website for funding information for local [OWL Groups](#) or [contact](#) the OWL Scotland education programme manager.

Your local OWL group contact is:

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Telephone:

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Email:

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