



THE DONALDSON TRUST

Response to the Education, Children and Young People
Committee's Call for Views on the *Schools (Residential
Outdoor Education) (Scotland) Bill*.

September 2024

About Neurodiversity

Neurodiversity describes the diversity of humans' brains and minds. A person who is, for example, autistic is neurodivergent; they are in a neurological minority, not the neuro-'typical' majority.

Other neurodivergences include: ADHD, dyscalculia, dyspraxia, dyslexia, dysgraphia, misophonia, Tourette's Syndrome, or differences in cognitive function.

About Us

Our work is built on an understanding that neurodiversity is not a medical construct; rather, it lies at the intersection of culture, mind, identity formation, and socio-political action.

The Donaldson Trust envisages a society in which neurodivergent people are understood, accepted, treated fairly, and valued.

Though there is much work to be done, we believe there are genuine opportunities to change society for the better. We aim to be at the forefront of driving that change – and making a difference *with and for* neurodivergent people and their families.

As the *National Body for Neurodiversity*, we will seek to lead by example. We exist to strengthen the public's understanding of neurodiversity, develop excellence in practice, and help neurodivergent people find their voice.

Alongside neurodivergent people and our partners across the third sector and academia, we write, campaign, and persuade in order to shape the policies being made on the issues most important to neurodivergent people and families.

We improve outcomes and representation via *Connect*. Our training and consultancy is accessed by organisations looking to build a culture of neuro-inclusion. We continue to develop our free, online information, support, and guidance resources to neurodivergent people, families, and professionals alongside it.

We continue to support children, young people, and adults through a variety of services based at our Linlithgow campus, where we enable every neurodivergent person to realise their goals & aspirations:

- **Sensational Learning Centre (SLC)**

We offer individualised, skills-based learning to children and young people with 'Additional Support Needs' (ASN) including sensory and communication differences.

A 'Grant-Aided Special School' (GASS), SLC is independent of local government.

- **Vibe**

Our wellbeing service for neurodivergent people ages 12-18, Vibe offers warm, low arousal spaces for neurodivergent young people to thrive and achieve their personal goals. The service focuses on reducing anxiety, developing life skills, literacy, numeracy, and growing self-esteem / resilience.

Vibe's activities mirror the interests and skills of the young people enrolled with a wellbeing framework and personal programme of skills development.

- **Gate**

Donaldson's' skills development and training offer for neurodivergent adults, Gate has been co-designed with those who benefit from it and offers a friendly environment where neurodivergent adults can relax and be themselves. Similar to other services, Gate takes an individualised approach to ensure trainees get the most from their time with us and achieve agreed goals and ambitions.

Trainees can learn skills through activities, or enrol in a vocational and accredited course, delivered by specialist staff / tutors. This includes art, cooking, and cybersecurity.

- **Treehouse**

Treehouse is a specialist wellbeing service offering bespoke, low-arousal environments to improve wellbeing and independence. Support is centred around individual studios, with the 'home-style' settings offering individualised spaces tailored to every person's needs. That allows people we support to participate in activities they co-design alongside their Wellbeing Practitioners.

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Established in the 1850's, The Donaldson Trust (formerly Donaldson's School) has provided supported education and care throughout its history and has now established itself in the neurodivergence space.

The full range of services offered by the Trust is found here:

<https://www.donaldsons.org.uk/>

**Together, we'll
find your voice.**

Overview

The Donaldson Trust is pleased to respond to the Education, Children and Young People Committee's *Call for Views* to Liz Smith MSP's Member's Bill, the *Schools (Residential Outdoor Education) (Scotland) Bill*.

The positive impact that personalised, skills-based approaches to learning – of which outdoor learning and residential visits are two – can have on the development of children & young people cannot be overstated. We believe this is especially true of neurodivergent people, whose social-communicatory differences are such that their ability to learn (or even be present) in 'mainstream' educational settings can be greatly diminished by the lack of reasonable adjustments on offer.

Embracing alternative approaches to education is central to our ethos as the National Body for Neurodiversity; harnessing them in order to support the young people enrolled at our Grant-Aided Special School and using our services is central to our practice.

We are encouraged that the Member has chosen to bring forward legislation that can help to embed outdoor learning in the practice of 'mainstream' schools. We support the principles behind this Bill and much of its content.

We have incorporated the thoughts and experiences of educators at our Grant-Aided Special School in our response.

We look forward to engaging with Liz Smith MSP and the Cross-Party Group on Outdoor Education as their legislation develops.

Residential Outdoor Education

The Donaldson Trust believes that all children and young people can thrive when they are supported to learn (or achieve a personal goal) in an environment tailored to their need(s). For lots of the neurodivergent people we support, this involves skills-based alternatives to the standard curriculum – and often includes outdoor activity (to a varying extent) depending on the circumstances of those involved. We know just how beneficial outdoor education can be; therefore, it is important that the Bill, and future guidance, harnesses the benefits of it for all, equally so.

If this Bill's ambitions are to be realised, outdoor education centres should be equipped to accommodate a wide range of abilities and needs. Without this, inequalities in access to outdoor learning will be perpetuated and lots of

neurodivergent young people will not be able to benefit from the personal development opportunities this learning could bring. For lots of neurodivergent people, adjustments may involve:

- A wide range of both physical and non-physical activities being spread across a stay, designed in conjunction with participants beforehand.
- Clear communication prior to and during the stay, covering responsibilities and opportunities.
- Adaptive equipment, ensuring that young people with physical barriers to access are still able to participate in activities to the greatest possible extent.
- 1:1 support, where this is the arrangement the young person has during their 'regular' day.
- Breaks and flexible schedules to counter fatigue and/or sensory overloading.

Staff involved in the supervision of young people participating should receive training that ensures baseline understanding of neurodivergence and the way in which social-communicatory differences present. Training in communication and emotional support strategies would be necessary for group leaders.

There will, inevitably, be times where a young person does not wish to participate. We believe that it will be counter-productive to require a young person (neurodivergent or not) to participate – and are encouraged this Bill makes it clear that this will not be the case.

In cases where, having wished to participate, a neurodivergent young person is either unable to participate or no longer feel able to fulfil the entirety of a planned stay, they should be supported in that decision. It is very important that outdoor residential education is designed in such a way that this is a logistically viable option. For this reason, and to ensure that the opportunity to participate is well-received by as many young people as possible, we believe schools should retain the option to plan these days and nights non-consecutively. Though some of the young people we support may be able to participate in outdoor education (with the appropriate support) for four nights and five days, almost all will not be able to.

Alternatively, outdoor education programmes could be developed in such a way that they are viable as 'standalone' days. This would give flexibility for all, since pupils who wish to participate in a more intensive, residential

experience can undertake a series of 'blocks', whereas pupils less comfortable with this could participate in one block, i.e., a full day, without overnight. Young people wishing to experience some residential education might split their entitlement in two and repeat it at a later date, for instance.

Overall, it is clear that the participation of neurodivergent children & young people in a programme of outdoor, residential education requires planning, resources, and support – for both the participant and school staff tasked with facilitating these. This is especially true for those with higher levels of support need; for instance, autistic people with a co-occurring learning disability. Most of the young people we support through our GASS (and some we support in wellbeing services but who attend a mainstream school part-time) would only be able to participate in any kind of residential placement if thorough consideration was given to their needs and the environments chosen for activities.

It is important to note, also, that a social-communicatory barrier is not necessarily as easily identified / accommodated as a physical barrier. Adjustments made would have to be personalised and carefully considered. These adjustments must be informed by the neurodivergent person themselves, ideally in conjunction with education or healthcare professionals involved in care or support and outdoor education leaders leading stays.

Eligibility

Though eligibility criteria based on age or school year may be a suitable approach when delivering residential, outdoor education in mainstream settings, we do not think this would be appropriate for Special Schools – such as our own. The composition of a Special School is such that there is often no recognisable school year, with young people grouped by their needs as opposed to age. Education, whether in the classroom or outdoors, should be designed around the needs, abilities, and interests of those involved and focused on delivering opportunities appropriate to the young person's particular social and academic development. It would not be appropriate to set arbitrary criteria for a young person's inclusion in or exclusion from outdoor education when person-centred solutions are foundational to their social development, educational attainment and wellbeing.

This being said, we recognise the advantages of age eligibility, from logistical / administrative perspectives, for many schools. Special Schools should retain the right to design and deliver outdoor and residential education for *all* of

their enrolled pupils, of whichever age, at their discretion, having engaged the young person and their parent-guardian with respect to said young person's needs and wishes; moreover, this clause should be included in the text of this legislation.

Funding

Delivering residential and outdoor education provision to young people would be financially unworkable without external support. This is particularly true in cases where a young person's needs are such that they require additional supports of the nature we have described earlier in this response. For instance, transportation, equipment, and additional personnel (to the extent necessary to meet the needs of young people in our GASS) would require financial investment beyond a basic package of funding that the Scottish Government would be providing to a mainstream school.

The opportunity to participate in residential, outdoor education will be particularly valuable for young people from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds, or marginalised groups, less likely to participate in an extra-curricular activity for financial reasons. It is important that all young people participating have their participation heavily subsidised by way of a Scottish Government grant to providers – and that all young people in receipt of social security, such as Child Disability Payment, have the place fully funded.

In order to ensure continuous improvement, funding should be made available to external researchers to ensure a thorough, independent assessment of outdoor education in Scotland in practice and the outcomes and ambitions spoken to in the notes and memoranda associated to this Bill. This should include speaking with the young people, including neurodivergent young people, who have participated in a programme offered by their school.

Overall, a well-resourced national outdoor education programme is necessary to facilitate universal participation, standardisation of quality / monitoring, and longer-term societal benefits.

Additional Comments

During our engagement when preparing our response, it was apparent that a significant consideration for all schools supporting young people with substantial support needs is the logistical effort involved in ensuring activities off-campus are both safe and enjoyable for the young people involved. An

opportunity to deliver on-campus outdoor learning (i.e. outdoor educators funded by the Scottish Government to deliver a similar skills-based learning at Special Schools) could be another aspect of this offer, especially for young people for whom residential is not a viable option. We know that neurodivergent pupils (especially those enrolled in mainstream settings without adequate support) experience some of the worst educational outcomes of any group, and outdoor education can be a tool that helps remedy this injustice.

Finally, we would be willing to speak to our personalised, skills-based approach to education – and the tangible benefit it has for neurodivergent learners as an alternative to exam-focused learning – as this legislation progresses. In light of the growing proportion of pupils acknowledged as neurodivergent, this is a conversation that will have an increasing relevance in the coming years; for example, there are 30,179 autistic young people attending publicly-funded schools in Scotland, according to Scottish Government statistics. That tallies to over 4% of the overall school population¹.

¹ 2024, Scottish Government, *Pupil Census 2023: Supplementary Statistics*.



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