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Context

Research¹ has shown there are benefits to children when there is increased access to nature and the outdoor play environment. Children have improved mental and physical well-being along with an increased capacity to learn and better understanding of nature and their environment²

Cambusbarron Playgroup

Cambusbarron Playgroup (the Playgroup) is a community playgroup which runs 5 mornings per week during term times. The playgroup has 3 permanent members of staff, 2 qualified staff members who are registered with the SSSC, and an administration assistant. The group is registered with and inspected by the Care Inspectorate. The playgroup operates in partnership with Stirling Council to provide funded places in line with the Young People and Children (Scotland) Act 2014. The group is registered to take a maximum of 16 children per session and the total number of children attending is 21 (9 part time, 12 full time as at May 2018). The group has been in existence for over 50 years, is managed by a parent led committee and is funded through fees and fund raising activities. Parents in Cambusbarron Playgroup recognise the value of a community based and parent led service. They remain very motivated and the group operates successfully providing a much needed early years service in the village as well as social and peer support network for parents. Their regular fundraising activities provide much anticipated social events for the village community. It is widely recognised that the group contributes to the social capital within the village, Cambusbarron Playgroup is more than the sum of its component parts - it fosters community service, builds relationships and creates a sense of belonging and community spirit. The enthusiasm of staff and parents is key to this service determining shared goals and vision to continue provision of this vital service.

What is Woodland Play?

Reports that children in the UK spend less time outdoors than the prison population³ reinforce concerns about the opportunities for learning that are being lost because children do not have sufficient opportunities for free, child led play in an outdoor and natural environment. Woodland Play sessions are based on the Forest Kindergarten model and provide children with these vital learning opportunities. The Lead Practitioner at Cambusbarron Playgroup is trained and experienced in delivering Forest Kindergarten sessions. Such practice has been established in Scandinavia for over 25 years and have supplied the evidence that such experience is beneficial to children's health and well being, self-esteem and confidence, perseverance and acquisition of knowledge and skills. Learning through play is child centred and enhanced with the freedom to explore using multiple senses. Adults step back and allow children to make their own decisions, to assess their own risk and the results show that children are curious and imaginative, their resilience, self-esteem and confidence enable them to make decisions, to persevere and to handle situations independently. These lifeskills and competencies lead to children who are healthier physically and mentally. Following initial pilot sessions held in early 2018 Playgroup aims to create their own Woodland Play Sessions based on the Forest Kindergarten model and offering young children frequent, regular play opportunities in a woodland and natural setting, throughout the year, in almost all weathers. This approach is considered more than taking children to a woodland or natural habitat to play as there are clear links to the curriculum⁴ and to the Scottish Government's objectives to create a more successful country.⁵

¹ Examples : Nicol, R, Higgins, P, Ross, H and Mannion, G (2007), Outdoor education in Scotland: a Summary of recent research, inverness: Scottish natural Heritage

Changing Landscapes, Changing Lives (2009) A Davy; Journal of the British Association For Early Childhood Education

² Scottish Real World Learning Partnership, (2011). *Outdoor learning and play for Scotland's children*. [online] Available at: <http://www.playscotland.org/wp-content/uploads/assets/MSP-RWL-briefing-paper-June-2011.pdf> [Accessed 2 Aug. 2016].

³ The Guardian (2016). Available at <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2016/mar/25/three-quarters-of-uk-children-spend-less-time-outdoors-than-prison-inmates-survey>

⁴ Experiences and outcomes guides for outdoor learning [online] Available at: <http://www.educationscotland.gov.uk/learningandteaching/approaches/outdoorlearning/about/experiencesandoutcomes.asp> [Accessed 3 Aug. 2016]

⁵ Learning and Teaching Scotland, (2010). *Curriculum for Excellence Through Outdoor Learning*. [online] Available at: https://www.educationscotland.gov.uk/Images/cfeoutdoorlearningfinal_tcm4-596061.pdf [Accessed 3 Aug. 2016].

Project Background

The playgroup operates from a room within the local Community Centre. It has access to a paved garden area to the front of the building however this has to be accessed via the main centre door. The garden is situated beside the main road and this easy access means that the garden is an attraction for local youths and litter in the form of empty cans, glass, sweet wrappers and cigarettes are often found in the garden. Vandalism has been a regular occurrence and has meant that all equipment has to be stored in a locked shed. This limits the types of play equipment which can be provided. Trained and experienced staff however also recognise the limitations of play in a garden environment, particularly in the paved communal Community Centre garden. Staff are aware that children are drawn to the more open ended play provided by the soil, water, by collecting stones, leaves and sticks and climbing trees. Unfortunately many of these activities have to be limited by the communal aspect of the community centre garden - other users do not appreciate stones and mud on the paving, or flower beds being dug up.

The outdoor environment has the potential to provide endless opportunities for child-led learning and risk taking and encompasses many of the experiences and outcomes prescribed by the Curriculum for Excellence. The integration of learning and outdoor experiences is considered to provide relevance and depth to the curriculum in ways that are difficult to achieve indoors and contributes to the long term Scottish Government aims of creating a Scotland which is smarter, healthier, safer, stronger, greener, wealthier and fairer.⁶ The vision of the CfE is that children should have regular, frequent, enjoyable and challenging opportunities to learn outdoors and that outdoor learning is embedded within the curriculum.⁷ This is a vision shared by the staff and parents of Cambusbarron Playgroup and while outdoor play is very much part of the existing curriculum the range of opportunities and challenge is currently restricted by the environment. Staff and parents are keen for the children to experience the benefits of regular access to natural play environment which more readily fits with the progressive and creative experiences suggested in the CfE vision statement⁸.

The village of Cambusbarron has many green public spaces, a significant one being an area known as Gillies Hill, an underused piece of woodland currently managed by the local development Trust. This woodland hosts a huge variety of flora and fauna including native species of trees such as Scots Pine, ash, oak and rowan, wild flowers such as marsh orchids, bluebells, red and white campion, mammals such as red squirrels, badgers and deer, birds such as buzzards, robins, siskins and dunnocks as well as a variety of smaller creatures such as toads, newts, bees, grasshoppers and ants. The woodland is easily accessible on foot from the village and is an ideal setting for children to play and learn in the natural environment.

Pilot Project

Playgroup conducted a pilot project in early 2018 holding short Woodland Play Sessions each attended by 8 playgroup children. This approach allowed staff, parents and children to become familiar with the woodland area and to gain confidence in adopting this different approach to children's learning.

The pilot was considered to be an overwhelming success with all parents and children in favour of developing more regular sessions. Feedback from parents included :

"I'm amazed, the girls loved it so much", "What a treat it is for all the kids to get out there and explore", "You may have to move playgroup outside altogether!" and "Lovely to see the woods being used in this way" while the children loved their experiences of "getting stuck in the mud", "making chocolate soup" and "trying to get on the swing".

⁶ Learning and Teaching Scotland, (2010). *Curriculum for Excellence Through Outdoor Learning*. [online] Available at: https://www.educationscotland.gov.uk/Images/cfeoutdoorlearningfinal_tcm4-596061.pdf [Accessed 3 Aug. 2016].

⁷ Learning and Teaching Scotland, (2010). *Curriculum for Excellence Through Outdoor Learning*. [online] Available at: https://www.educationscotland.gov.uk/Images/cfeoutdoorlearningfinal_tcm4-596061.pdf [Accessed 3 Aug. 2016].

⁸ O'Brien, L. and Murray, R. (2006). *A marvellous opportunity for children to learn*. [online] Available at: [http://www.forestry.gov.uk/pdf/fr0112forestschooolsreport.pdf/\\$FILE/fr0112forestschooolsreport.pdf](http://www.forestry.gov.uk/pdf/fr0112forestschooolsreport.pdf/$FILE/fr0112forestschooolsreport.pdf) [Accessed 2 Aug. 2016].

Cambusbarron Playgroup

With the children now more confident in their surroundings staff intend to build and develop their woodland experiences. The short sessions have precluded activities such as fire making whiPlaygroup now wishes to build on the success of the pilot and hold regular woodland play sessions.

Location



Gillies Hill woodland is managed by Cambusbarron Development Trust who are keen to increase public use of the area. The pilot sessions were held on a site a short walk from an access path known as the “Garages” on a road also named Gillies Hill. Initially, sessions will continue on this site however there is significant scope for the location to change if required. The “Garages” will therefore continue to be the drop off and pick up point for parents. Staff and attending parents’ cars will be parked on Gillies Hill. Staff, parents and children will walk along an agreed path to the designated site. The site has a mix of vegetation underfoot, some flat spaces as well as some slopes. There is a small stream, natural bridge and plenty of trees so a good variety of play experiences can be achieved.

Safety

Although children’s safety is paramount there is increasing recognition that children need to experience and negotiate risk in order to develop their personal risk management ability and to develop confidence, self-esteem and resilience. The outdoor learning environment lends itself to the move away from a risk-averse approach to one of a risk benefit approach where

children taking part in Woodland Play Sessions will be exposed to potentially hazardous activities in a relatively safe and controlled environment⁹. Playgroup Policies will be revised to meet this approach.

Budget

Funding will be required for equipment such as tools, ropes and tarpaulins for den building. Books and resources which help identify bugs, beasties, trees and flowers will increase children's understanding of and relationship with the natural environment. It is recognised that for children to develop a passion for the outdoor environment that the participating adults are also motivated and enthusiastic. To this end staffing is a vital part of this project and funding will be sought to meet the costs of staff training. A spreadsheet containing more details of costings is attached.

Wider Impact

Research evidences that children who are exposed to and develop an appreciation for the outdoor environment are more likely to become environmentally aware and to remain positive about nature and the outdoors and to have the mental and physical health benefits this brings. Children who have regular access to outdoors encourage their parents to also be more proactive to the outdoors. Cambusbarron is a small village and links within the village are strong. It is expected that many of the children attending playgroup will have previously attended Toddlers and will go on to attend school. The links formed through these transitions are useful in ensuring a wider impact for the project. Joint sessions in particular where Toddlers or nursery and school children are invited to attend are planned. This meets with the aims of the Community Trust who wish to increase the use of the woodland and who also aim to ensure that the local environment is used responsibly.

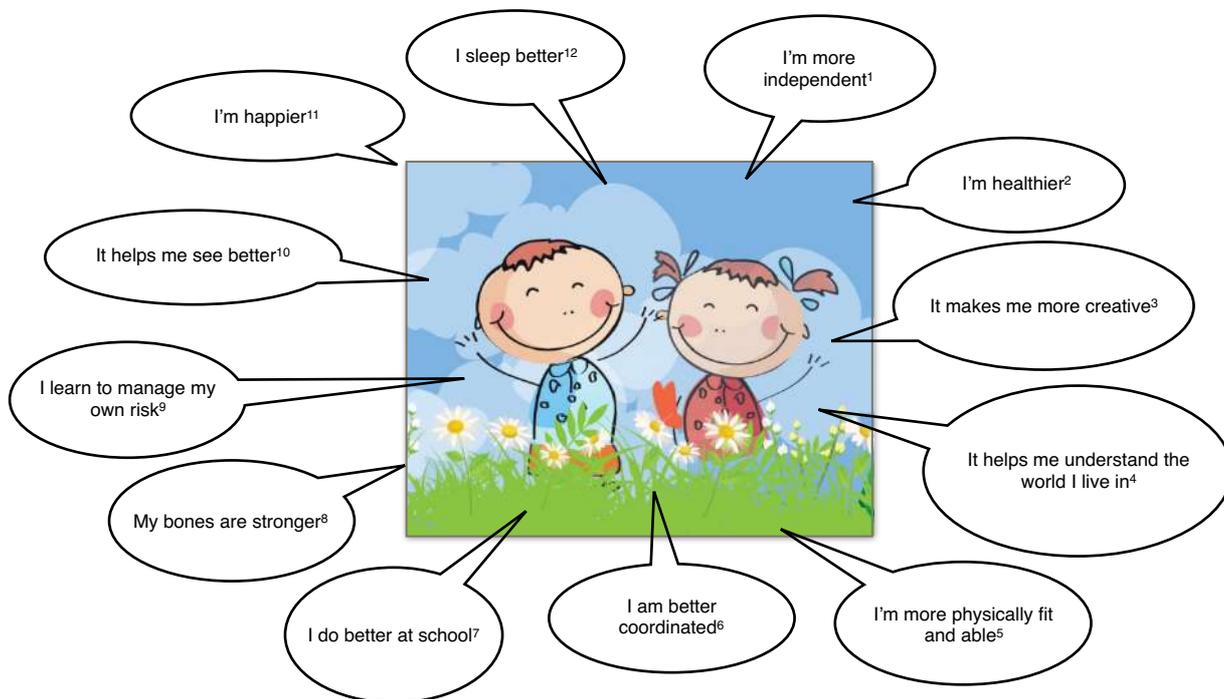
Monitoring

Regular meetings between staff members and parents will be held following introduction of Woodland Play Sessions to ensure that it meets the needs of all of those involved. It is anticipated that experience will drive provision and that sessions will be fluid and adapt to the changing seasons, weather and children's needs. Feedback will be sought at regular intervals and practice adapted as necessary. A more formal review of the outcome will be presented at the group AGM or open evening.

⁹ The Care Inspectorate, (2016). *My World Outdoors*. [online] Available at: http://www.careinspectorate.com/images/documents/3091/My_world_outdoors_-_early_years_good_practice_2016.pdf [Accessed 3 Aug. 2016].

Appendix

Benefits



1. Outdoor play is less adult prescribed allowing children to make decisions about where to play and who to play with.
2. Bacteria, viruses and other yucky stuff in the soil and mud helps develop our immune systems and can help combat asthma and allergies. Research shows that children who are active are more like to remain active in later life reducing future risks of cancer, diabetes and obesity.
3. The indoor environment is fairly stable whereas the outdoor world changes minute by minute, this encourages interest and stimulates curiosity and imagination.
4. Children learn about the world around them through direct experiences, they learn names for trees, flowers, animals and insects. They appreciate seasonality and weather patterns and increase their environmental awareness
5. Running around, exploring, climbing, playing with sticks and stones strengthens muscles and bones and increases stamina and dexterity.
6. Uneven or unstable surfaces such as rocks, trees, sand and mud develop balance, agility and dexterity
7. Regular access to outdoor play improves concentration, attention span and memory
8. Most of our vitamin D comes from sunlight, vitamin D is essential for strong bones
9. The outdoor environment provides challenge and excitement and encourages children to explore their own limitations and stretch their abilities. It promotes resilience, persistence and confidence.
10. Sunshine and natural light lower the chance of short sightedness and improves distance vision.
11. Access to outdoor areas relieves stress and promotes a sense of wellbeing.
12. Active physical play in the outdoors burns energy. It reduces anxiety and stress and aids restful sleep.