



Glasgow City Council

Education, Skills and Early Years City Policy Committee

Report by Executive Director of Education

Contact: Neil Wightwick (Blairvadach)

Date: Sept 2025

Item 3

2nd October 2025

Glasgow City Council - Blairvadach Outdoor Education Services Report

Purpose of Report:

1. Provide an update on the current service - functions, occupancy, and outlook.
2. Provide an overview of Blairvadach related outdoor learning activity within the city

Recommendations:

The Committee is asked to note the update and Education Services' work to support all young people to access and benefit from a high quality and progressive outdoor education experience throughout their journey at school.

Ward No(s):

Citywide: ✓

Local member(s) advised: Yes ☐ No ☐

consulted: Yes ☐ No ☐

1. Introduction

1.1 Throughout 2024, Blairvadach maintained service levels across all four major workstreams, embedding changes to pricing structures and operating procedures. This approach has continued to deliver a more predictable budget while optimising available resources.

1.2 Highlights included:

- 1.2.1 A focus on programme content, connections to wider achievement, curriculum links, and measuring impact.
- 1.2.2 Delivery of the dual-accredited Glasgow Urban Adventure Award (GUAA).
- 1.2.3 Development of the *Outdoor Learning Purpose and Progression* framework.

1.3 Service demand and delivery:

- 1.3.1 Demand for the Residential Service continues to exceed capacity.
- 1.3.2 Pinkston Basin has faced some occupancy challenges but achieved higher usage than previous years due to service reform, including adjusted pricing, shorter contact time, and inclusion of transport in the schools package.
- 1.3.3 The DofE programme is available in almost all mainstream secondary schools and is complemented by a virtual DofE centre for ASL schools and units that cannot support their own programme.
- 1.3.4 The therapeutic outdoor team continues to deliver maximum impact experiences for the most vulnerable young people in care and not fully engaged with school. Demand for this service currently exceeds capacity and as a result we currently have a waiting list.

1.4 National contribution and recognition:

- 1.4.1 The benefits of outdoor learning, particularly residential outdoor education, are increasingly recognised nationally. Blairvadach continues engaging and influence national policy through representation on national bodies. The service currently awaits the outcome of the Schools (Residential Outdoor Education) (Scotland) Bill.
- 1.4.2 The release of Education Scotland's '*Guiding Framework for the Improvement of Residential Outdoor Learning Experiences in*

Scotland' confirms that Blairvadach Residential Centre continues to lead nationally in delivering high-quality outdoor learning experiences.

2. Blairvadach Service Resource

- 2.1 **Residential Outdoor Education Centre.** A residential base 45 minutes from Glasgow in Rhu, next to the Gareloch, the Centre offers a range of water and land based curricular linked outdoor education programmes that support the development of people as successful learners and effective contributors.
- 2.2 **Blairvadach at Pinkston Basin.** A city centre base at the Pinkston Watersports Centre. This Centre offers non-residential outdoor education programmes delivering the [Glasgow Urban Adventure Award \(GUAA\)](#).
- 2.3 **Therapeutic Outdoor Education.** In partnership with Glasgow Virtual School, the instructional team work with young people who struggle to engage with schools and are care experienced. The therapeutic outdoor education programme builds trust, resilience and confidence in young people. In many cases, this programme is the only formal education engagement these young people have
- 2.4 **Duke of Edinburgh Award (DofE).** The DofE Glasgow Team, build capacity for the award across the city through leader training, direct schools support and delivering initiatives to drive the award forward. They coordinate volunteers, manage equipment stores and ensure the programme is aligned within Glasgow and DofE guidance
- 2.5 **Training and Resources.** Blairvadach supports schools through outdoor learning training for teachers, resources and special projects.

3. Utilisation Patterns and Future Outlook

3.1 Residential Centre

- 3.1.1 Occupancy at the Residential Centre in the 2024/25 financial year reached its highest level since 2019. Demand continues to exceed the Centre's capacity, though late cancellations and reduced participant numbers remain ongoing challenges.
- 3.1.2 The 2022 strategy to optimise service delivery is now fully embedded and showing positive results. The new pricing structure

provides parity for bookings throughout the year and has enabled more of Glasgow's young people to access the resource.

- 3.1.3 Individual user occupancy increased by 13% compared with the previous year, while total activity days increased by only 2.3%, indicating a higher number of participants attending shorter courses.

Table 1: Total service users at the residential centre

Year	2022/2023	2023/2024	2024/2025
Total Individual Service Users	2033	2513	2859
Total Activity Days*	6182	10500	10751

*An activity day is one person on a course for one day

- 3.1.4 90% of pupils rated the residential experience as adventurous or highly adventurous, with Gorge Walking and Scrambling (similar to caving) voted as the most adventurous activities. 70% of pupils reported feeling proud after completing their activities. The most challenging aspects of the residential experience were 'Staying Away from Home' (43%) and 'Adventurous Activities' (22%).
- 3.1.5 All schools reported the experience as excellent in helping pupils adopt a positive attitude toward challenge.
- 3.1.6 Young people leave their courses with increased confidence in coping emotionally and physically in challenging situations. These personal and social developments are closely linked with broader educational outcomes, creating a unique learning environment. 95% of schools reported the experience as good or excellent in helping pupils understand 'how humans impact the natural environment'.
- 3.1.7 During school holidays, the Residential Centre offers opportunities for Glasgow's young people through Gold Duke of Edinburgh Award residentials and MCR Pathways summer residential courses.
- 3.1.8 The Centre partners with the Royal Navy Sailing Association, Andrew Simpson Foundation, and Royal Yachting Association to offer a variety of sailing programmes throughout the year when Glasgow schools are not using the facilities. These programmes are currently in the second year of a three-year funding cycle.
- 3.1.9 In 2024, the Residential Centre introduced pre and post-visit portfolios to be completed in the classroom. This addition has

proved invaluable in preparing young people, parents/carers, and teachers for the visit. The structured workbooks also record a range of Health and Wellbeing outcomes, focusing on social and emotional experiences. Additionally, the workbooks are used to compare pupil anxiety levels before and after the residential experience through analysis of participant comfort zones. This enhancement further integrates the residential experience into the wider school learning journey.

3.1.10 The full teacher feedback report can be found at:

https://www.blairvadach.org.uk/Content/UserGenerated/Image/Downloads/Impact_Report_2025/reducedsizeteacherfeedback_web.pdf

3.2 Pinkston Basin

3.2.1 The [*Glasgow Urban Adventure Award*](#) has been developed to encourage people in Glasgow to explore the city's outdoor spaces through learning and adventurous activities. The award offers participants three pathways to shape their own experiences:

- Wild Self – developing creative and personal skills
- Wild Others – building teamwork and leadership
- Wild Environment – learning about the environment and conservation

This locally designed award incorporates the National Outdoor Learning Award (NOLA) and National Paddle Sport Proficiency Awards into a bespoke, Glasgow-focused programme

3.2.2 In 2024/2025, 991 pupils participated in the three-day Glasgow Urban Adventure Award at Pinkston Basin.

3.2.3 Of these participants, 141 pupils (14%) were from specialist education or nurture units, which require additional resources compared to mainstream schools. This level of support ensure the service has the widest possible reach and benefit to Glasgow's young people.

3.2.4 Table 2 presents pupil responses on the aspects of the GUAA they enjoyed most. The data highlights the wide range of personal, social and environmental learning opportunities offered through the award.

Table 2
What were the important parts of the GUAA to you?



3.2.5 Table 3 demonstrates the cross curricular learning that takes place at the heart of the GUAA, the data is gathered from teachers supporting the visit:

Table 3:
Curriculum for Excellence: How well did the course promote learning in the areas of:



3.3 Care Experience

3.3.1 This is the 4th year of partnership with Glasgow Virtual School(GVS) to provide care experienced learners with 1:1 or small group therapeutic outdoor education experiences. Delivering 280 contact days to 21 young people. This high impact programme consistently delivers positive reports for young people who may be experiencing otherwise chaotic and challenging lives.

3.3.2 The programme is aimed at care experienced young people who are having difficulty maintaining their school placement. The support increases the learner's self-esteem, confidence and helps re-engage them back into a positive learning environment. As a

result of taking part, pupils have developed their resilience, self-efficacy, social and emotional skills which have been transferred to improving educational outcomes. In addition, pupils gain accreditation through national proficiency awards. In this year it included:

- Paddle start award- 3
- GoMTB (Mountain Biking) level 1- 8
- GoMTB level 2- 5
- GoMTB level 3- 1
- NNAS ODA (Navigation Awards) 1 star- 3
- Paddlepower start - 4
- Paddlerpower discover - 3

3.4 Duke of Edinburgh Award Team (DofE)

- 3.4.1 In 2024/25 there were 1928 enrolments and 945 DofE completions in Glasgow
- 3.4.2 47.7% of all Glasgow enrolments are from SIMD 1-3, 8.5% from ASN and 29.8% from ethnic minority.
- 3.4.3 52.2% of all Glasgow awards achieved are from SIMD 1-3, 9.5% from ASN and 31.3% are from ethnic minority. It should be noted that young people self-declare ASN and DofE believe it is under-recorded nationally
- 3.4.4 In 2024/25 the award contributed 32,149 hours of voluntary community service which equates to £205,720 of local economic benefit
- 3.4.5 In 2024/2025 1672 young people took part in an expedition, delivering a total of 6178 outdoor days on a DofE programme
- 3.4.6 The value of the award is demonstrated through the commitment by schools to incorporating it into curriculum time. 86% of schools dedicate at least one period a week to delivering the award

3.5 Training and Resources

- 3.5.1 Blairvadach hosts and maintains a suite of outdoor learning resources for schools, including the highly popular orienteering maps developed for each school estate, these maps open up a host of cross curricular local activities.

- 3.5.2 The Duke of Edinburgh's Award (DofE) service delivers a programme of adventure education leadership and coaching courses for teachers and school leaders. These courses develop qualifications, skills, and expertise in paddlesports, mountain sports, bikeability, and outdoor first aid. By building this capacity, the service supports greater participation in DofE and outdoor learning across schools.
- 3.5.3 The service delivers targeted Outdoor Learning CPD for teachers and support staff. Current provision includes; OEAP *Outdoor Learning Card* training and Education Scotland's *Teaching Learning Outdoors* programme.
- 3.5.4 In partnership with Trades House, Blairvadach is in the planning stages to deliver a three-year pilot project to embed a culture of outdoor learning at Saracen Primary School. The project aims to strengthen staff skills, knowledge, and capacity, ensuring that outdoor learning becomes an integrated and routine element of the school day. The wider objective of this project is to develop an efficient package that can efficiently build outdoor learning capacity and culture across all Glasgow schools.

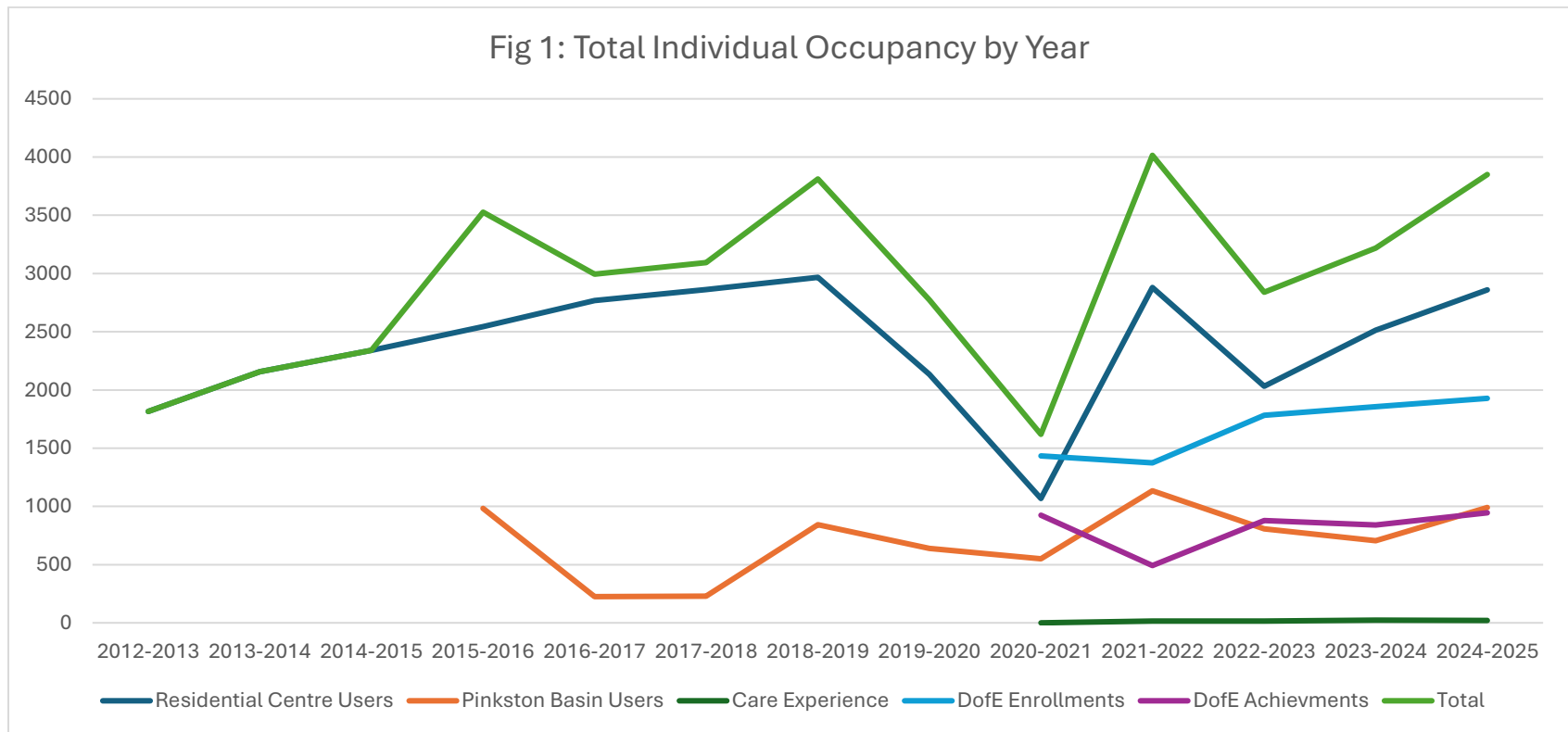
4. Current Service Levels

4.1 Total Individual Occupancy

Figure 1 below shows how the service has developed since 2012.

Key points:

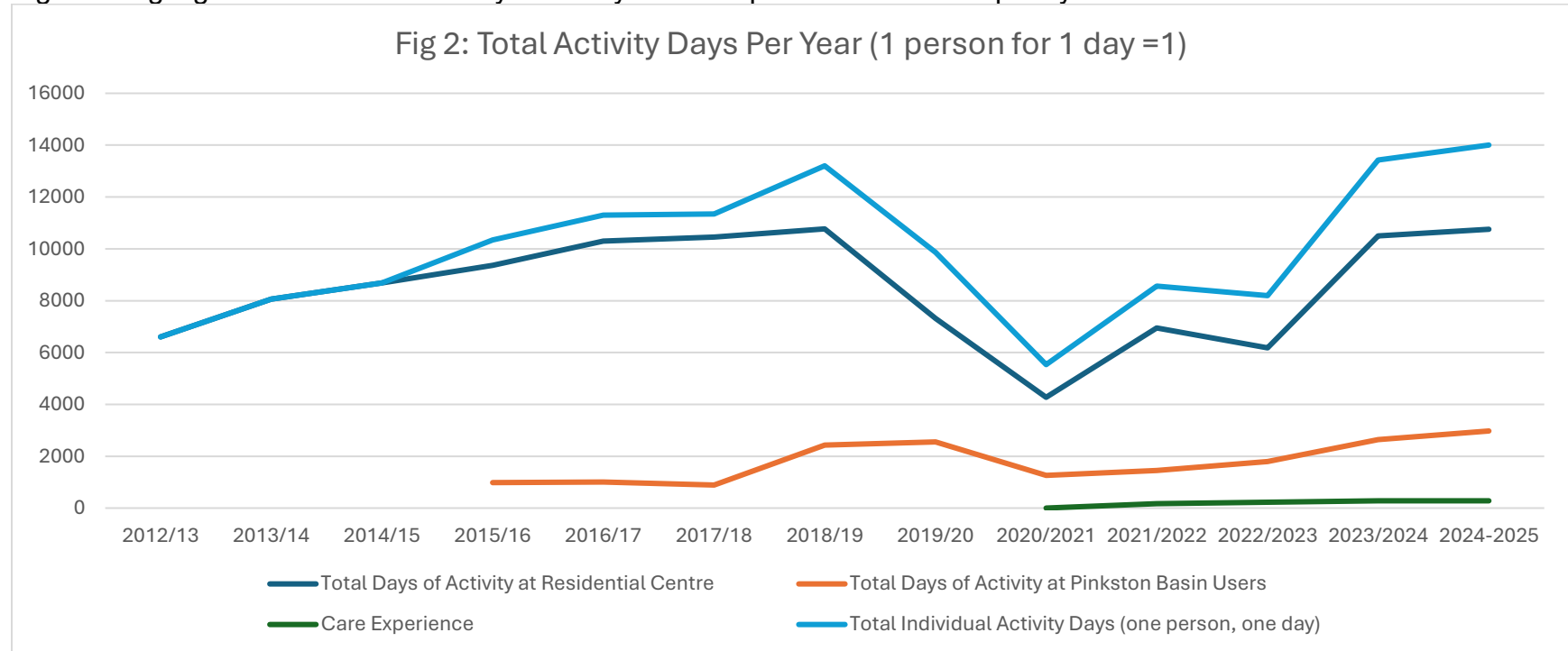
- COVID-19 affected all services between 2019 and 2022.
- Pinkston Basin was added to the service in 2015.
- DofE and Care Experience delivery were introduced in 2020.



4.2 Total Activity Days Per Year – Comparison

The service delivers programmes of varying lengths. To allow comparison across years, each course is measured in *Activity Days* — where one person attending one day of a course equals one Activity Day.

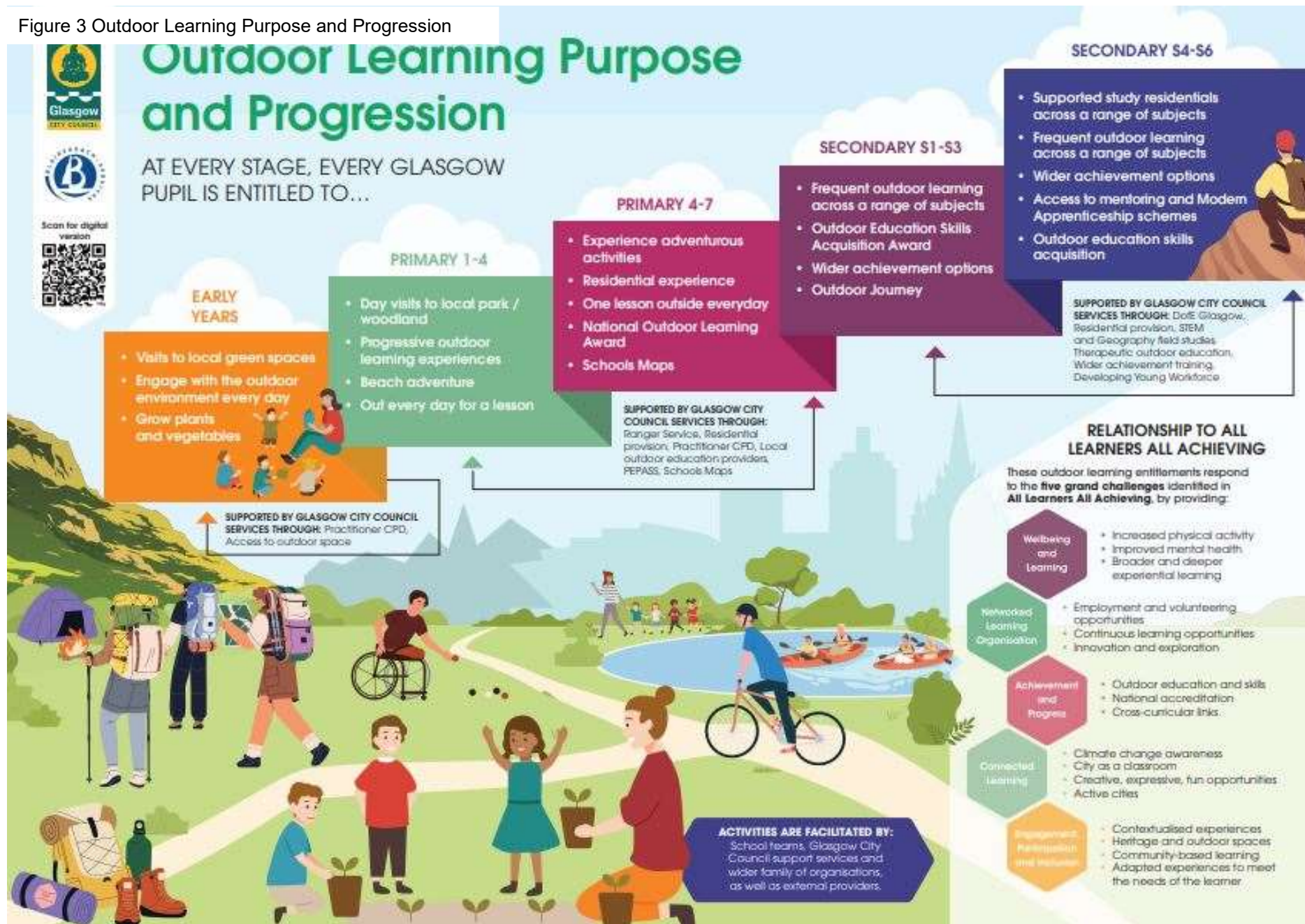
Figure 2 highlights the service's steady recovery from the pandemic over the past years.



5. Outdoor Learning Purpose and Progression

- 5.1 Outdoor learning can enhance teaching and learning across the entire curriculum and should be considered an integral part of school practice. While outdoor learning has traditionally been linked to subjects such as science, social studies, and health and wellbeing, rich, in-depth, and progressive learning opportunities exist for all curricular areas.
- 5.2 Access to green spaces and nature has been shown to support physical, emotional, and mental health. Research demonstrates that outdoor learning can improve behaviour, self-worth, and emotional wellbeing. Students who engage fully with learning outside the classroom also tend to show higher levels of physical fitness and motor skills development
- 5.3 In 2024, at the request of this committee, the '*Outdoor Learning Purpose and Progression Framework*' (Figure 3) was developed as a working document to outline outdoor learning entitlements across the education journey. Its aim is to set clear expectations, provide simple case studies, and show how existing internal and external services can support outdoor learning throughout the curriculum. The next steps for this framework is wider sharing across the education network.

Figure 3 Outdoor Learning Purpose and Progression



6. Feedback

In their own words: Some quotes from teachers and parents about their experience with our service:

6.1 Class Teacher comment on Pinkston Basin:

"Activities were varied each week and allowed children to appreciate the nature around them and have also given them knowledge of parks around Glasgow that they might now be likely to visit."

"They learn to express their ideas, listen to others, and negotiate roles in a way that fosters teamwork and other skills. They develop empathy by seeing how their actions impact others, learning to support peers who may feel left out or frustrated."

6.2 Glasgow Primary Teacher feedback on a residential experience:

"Seeing the children flourish in ways that I have never seen in the classroom was fantastic. It gave them a platform to be confident, to be resilient, and the instructors didn't let them "give up" so easily".

6.3 Care Experience Parent/Carer:

"Blairvadach Instructor was so good with C. They formed a real bond and C found him really supportive and encouraging. He learned a lot about nature too which was outwith the program criteria. He has been a great male role model for C"

7. Policy and Resource Implications

Resource Implications:

Financial: maintain current level of financial subsidy and resourcing

Legal: NA

Personnel: maintain current staffing levels

Procurement: NA

Council Strategic Plan:

Specify which Grand Challenge (s) and Mission (s) the proposal supports.

- Increase Opportunity and prosperity for all our citizens (Mission 3 Raise attainment amongst Glasgow's Children and young people)
- Fight the climate emergency in a just transition to a net zero Glasgow (Mission 2 Become a net zero carbon city by 2030)
- Reduce poverty and inequality in our communities. (Mission 2 Meet the learning and care needs of families before and through school, Mission 3 Improve the Health and wellbeing of our local communities, Mission 4 Support Glasgow to be a city that is active and culturally vibrant)
- Enable staff to deliver essential services in a sustainable, innovative, and efficient way for our communities. (Mission 1 Create safe, clean, and thriving neighbourhoods, Mission 2 Run an open well governed council in partnership with all our communities)

Equality and Socio-Economic Impacts:

Does the proposal support the Council's Equality Outcomes 2021-25? Please specify.

Yes

- CLPL Provision across outcomes
- Inclusion of all young people
- Mental health and wellbeing focus

What are the potential equality impacts as a result of this report?

Positive

Please highlight if the policy/proposal will help address socio-economic disadvantage?

Yes.

All young people access a subsidised residential experience which they wouldn't necessarily be able to given the cost of the same on the open market.

Engagement in civic responsibility and accountability

Climate Impacts:

Does the proposal support any Climate Plan actions?

Yes

Please specify:

Theme 1 Communication & Community Empowerment
Theme 2 Just and Inclusive Place
Theme 4 Health and Wellbeing

Will the proposal contribute to Glasgow's net zero carbon target?

Yes

Privacy and Data Protection Impacts:

Are there any potential data protection impacts as a result of this report

No

10 Recommendations

10.1 The Committee is asked to note the update and Education Services' work to support all young people to access and benefit from a high quality and progressive outdoor education experience throughout their journey at school.