

## The proposed closure of Blairvadach – the campaign for Outdoor Education grows

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# Scotland's poorest let down by outdoor centre closures

'Once you lose a place like that, you will never get it back'

BY KARIN GOODWIN

SCOTLAND'S school children are being sold short by the closure of outdoor residential centres across the country, it is claimed.

The outcry comes as Glasgow City Council last week announced proposals to close Blairvadach Outdoor Centre, one of several measures aimed at making savings of £42 million.

It is understood that staff at the only outdoor centre owned by the local authority were informed that the closure of Blairvadach was to be proposed – and likely to be approved – at an emergency meeting just minutes before the budget debate began.

The current proposal is for the centre to remain open until the end of June. Bookings will be cancelled for the rest of 2020/21, affecting hundreds of children across Glasgow, who are all currently offered a one

week trip to a residential centre in their last year of primary school. Activities include climbing, hill walking, orienteering, scrambling, canoeing and field studies.

Almost 40 jobs are said to be under threat. A petition set up to save the centre on Friday has so far attracted over 6000 signatures.

Glasgow City Council told the Sunday National the proposed closure is part of a wider effort to develop a Glasgow model for outdoor education – which is more inclusive and accessible to young people in the city – including during the school day. The Blairvadach team already delivers watersports sessions at the city's Pinkston Watersports Centre.

On Friday Maureen McKenna, director of education, emailed all teaching staff to "remind" them that council employees they should not comment on the decision via social media "regardless of personal views".

Experts claim the provision of outdoor residential centres across Scotland is a postcode lottery, with

demand in many local authority areas outstripping supply. In Glasgow, schools are only guaranteed places at Blairvadach every two years as a result. Though other centres, run by private companies or trusts are also used, many are expensive, with no discounts offered to those eligible for free school meals, meaning those children are often unable to go. Some argue residential should be free at the point of delivery, as was once the case.

Dr Roger Scrutton, honorary research fellow in outdoor education at Edinburgh University, said the proposed closure of Blairvadach was "depressing and short-sighted".

He added: "In the outdoor learning sector we have seen so many local authority residential centres close that we have become almost immune to the depressing short-sightedness that this demonstrates.

"Decisions like these are often poorly informed. The evidence indicates that the closures are financially, not educationally, driven.



**Glasgow City Council is proposing to close Blairvadach Outdoor Centre**

"There is overwhelmingly survey and research evidence that residential outdoor learning contributes massively to the personal and academic development of children and young people through enjoyable, memorable and lasting experiences."

According to the Scottish Government's Curriculum for Excellence Through Outdoor Learning all Scottish children have teaching time outdoors. The policy document states this is achieved through residential trips, which it says

There has been extensive press coverage of the proposed closure of Blairvadach ([see here for Evening Times](#)) and I was pleased to be quoted in the Sunday National at the weekend. Congratulations to the journalist concerned, Karin Goodwin, for finding professionals within the Outdoor Education sector who have been prepared to speak out publicly against what is happening. Also for revealing that Glasgow City Council has tried to gag teachers in the city. That must be illegal surely? Our Public Authorities should be listening to professional opinion – and young people and their parents – not trying to stifle it.





help build confidence, resilience and a sense of adventure. It also recommends better use of school grounds and local green spaces as a routine part of teaching throughout the year.

Peter Higgins, chair in outdoor environmental and sustainability education at Edinburgh University, said that while he was a strong advocate of local outdoor learning throughout the year, residential opportunities were also an essential element.

"Once you lose a place like that you'll never get it back again," he added.

"The outdoors is a powerful learning environment – the evidence says kids learn better outdoors. So if we want to close the attainment gap it is completely nonsensical to deny them that powerful learning environment."

Nick Kempe, a campaigner on outdoor access and conservation, and previous president of the Mountaineering Council of Scotland, said: "Children in Glasgow are being sold short, particularly the less well off whose parents cannot afford to take them to the countryside."

"There has been a steady closure of outdoor centres across Scotland and again that has affected poorer children most."

A spokesman for Glasgow City Council said its managers were meeting staff to explore redeployment options. "In a city that prides itself on having over 90 parks and open spaces, officers are looking at alternative delivery models to maintain the benefits of outdoor learning that complements a pupil's education."

"Glasgow is committed to exploring new, innovative and alternative ways in which to offer outdoor education opportunities that best meet the needs of our children, young people and families," he added.



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**Nick Kempe**

Pete Higgins was absolutely right to say that residential provision is an essential part of outdoor education provision. The suggestion from the Glasgow City "spokesman" that undertaking activities in

the City's 90 parks and open spaces is equivalent to experiencing the landscape of the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park or of the Clyde Estuary show a complete lack of understanding of outdoor education. Walking up to the top of Queen's Park, one of Glasgow's best viewpoints – and dear to me, its my local hill – is NOT the same as walking up Conic Hill, Ben Lomond or the Cobbler. Launching a boat onto the Clyde by the city centre, where my daughter learned to sail, is NOT comparable to sailing on Loch Lomond or the Clyde.

What school in Glasgow can, in weather like this, provide children with gum boots and waterproofs, let them enjoy sliding around in the mud and hose them down afterwards? What school in Glasgow can take children out in the dark and let them find their way through a boulder field by touch? Blairvadach does both those things and lot lots more. The Council should be duty bound to ensure that every child gets to participate in activities such as this that are challenging for them and to experience Scotland's wild and rugged landscapes.

Earlier last week, another piece in the National reported that the proposed cut was part of a budget deal between the Greens and SNP on Glasgow City Council. I was dismayed by this and have been in touch with the Greens. They have told me that while they have agreed to support the broad elements in Glasgow's provisional budget – more money may become available once Westminster has agreed its budget – they haven't agreed every element of the package. The fact that last year they proposed making a new capital investment of £1m in the centre provides hope ([see here for link to 2019-20 Green budget proposals](#)):

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**Blairvadach Outdoor Resource Centre in**  
Putting Glasgow's outdoor education ce  
investing in our irreplaceable residential  
people.

The SNP administration failed to support last year's amendment but it suggests there is everything to play for still. The underlying issue is that the Scottish Government is starving Local Authorities of funds.

Meantime last night a petition to stop the closure ([see here](#)) had gained 8,416 signatures – please sign if you have not already done so – and its clear the wider public really value outdoor education. The Evening Times has done a short report on You Tube from people talking about what Blairvadach meant to them (see below) – its time our politicians listened and delivered the resources necessary to deliver public services.

Its possible that the emerging campaign to save Blairvadach campaign could mark a turning point for Outdoor Education. Instead of playing one part of the education system off against another ("we need to cut outdoor education to preserve core teaching"), we need politicians who will value and invest in a whole range of outdoor educational experiences and recognise that Outdoor Education can transform lives. Enabling all children to get out into our National Parks should be a key part of that. That requires not just Residential Outdoor Education Centres, but a Ranger Service dedicated to facilitating thousands more people to enjoy the National Park instead of spending their time policing campers as

they do at present.

### **Category**

1. Loch Lomond and Trossachs

### **Tags**

1. outdoor education
2. outdoor recreation
3. vision for National Parks

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