



**Royal College of
Paediatrics and Child Health**

Leading the way in Children's Health

Royal College of Paediatric and Child Health (RCPCH) Wales response to the Children, Young People and Education inquiry into the Residential Outdoor Education (Wales) Bill

February 2024

This response has been prepared in collaboration with the Welsh Institute for Physical Activity, Health and Sport (WIPAHS). WIPAHS is a pan-Wales, multi-disciplinary institute that aims to create a healthier society through the transformative power of physical activity and sport.¹

Introduction

RCPCH Wales supports the aspiration of the Residential Outdoor Education (Wales) Bill as it aims to improve the health of children and young people and to give 'every child and young person in maintained schools an opportunity to participate, free of charge'.

However, data specifically relating to residential outdoor education is currently limited as often the impact is studied alongside other factors which makes it difficult to assess the specific impact. If the Bill were to be successful, effective monitoring of the implementation and impact would be needed to ensure it is beneficial to the health and wellbeing of children and young people and cost effective.

RCPCH Wales is aware of the current financial challenges facing the Welsh Government. If the Welsh Government believes the Bill is too expensive to deliver, RCPCH Wales would welcome the aspirations of the Bill to be incorporated into the new curriculum. The Welsh Government should seek to expand opportunities and choices available for children to engage with various outdoor educational activities, be it residential or local, with an emphasis on the importance of physical activity.

¹ WIPAHS <https://www.swansea.ac.uk/sports-science/astem/wipahs/>

Residential Outdoor Education (Wales) Bill: Potential health impact

The lifetime benefits of physical activity for children and young people are undeniable. It is well documented that children and young people who partake in regular physical activity witness physical and mental health benefits. This includes maintaining a healthy weight which in turn reduces the probability of developing several noncommunicable diseases such as: coronary heart disease, stroke, type two diabetes and colon cancer.

Despite this, children and young people in Wales are scoring poorly against the World Health Organization (WHO) guidelines for daily physical activity.²

The Fourth Pandemic of Childhood Inactivity in Wales report, led by Gareth Stratton at Swansea University, gave Wales's children and young people an F for overall physical activity.³ This Report Card was part of the Active Healthy Kid Global Alliance, with Wales scoring one of the lowest scores out of nearly 60 countries.

This research concluded that 'a significant effort needs to be made to address the very low physical activity levels among young people in Wales'⁴.

The Residential Outdoor Education (Wales) Bill could assist in improving Wales's physical activity score, reducing sedentary behaviour, promoting healthy lifestyle choices and having a long-lasting positive impact on children and young people's mental health.

The School Health Research Network: Student Health and Wellbeing Survey collected responses from 123,204 students in years 7 to 11 in 2021/22 and found:

- Only 16% of young people met the WHO recommended physical activity guidelines of at least 60 minutes per day, with a decline by age. This has fallen from 18.3% in 2017.
- A lower percentage (14%) of young people from less affluent families met the recommended daily physical activity guidelines, compared to 18% from more affluent families.
- Nearly one in five (18%) of young people reported sitting down for 7 or more hours on a weekday. This compares to just 10% in 2017.

² <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/physical-activity>

³ [The Fourth Pandemic of Childhood Inactivity in Wales](#)

⁴ [The Fourth Pandemic of Childhood Inactivity in Wales](#)

- Reports of vigorous exercise outside of school time (at least 4 times a week) has fallen from 43% in 2017 to 37% in 2021.⁵

WIPAHS believe the troubling findings from these self-report data are further emphasised by recent nationwide, device-based measures of physical activity and sedentary time. This revealed that, during the pandemic, children were spending an average of 14 hours a day sedentary.⁶ Whilst physical activity and sedentary time improved on the removal of COVID-19 restrictions, they remain extremely poor and far below the targets set by WHO in its Global Action Plan on Physical Activity which called for a 15% relative reduction on the global prevalence of physical inactivity by 2030.

The Bill could have an impact on promoting healthy lifestyle choices, setting the foundations for improved physical and mental health and reducing health inequalities.

Children in less affluent families often experience health inequalities with obesity, smoking and vaping being higher and physical activity and school attainment being lower compared to their more affluent counterparts.

Children from the poorest 20% of households are also four times as likely to have serious mental health difficulties by the age of 11 compared to those from the wealthiest 20%.⁷

The Bill aims to give 'every child and young person in maintained schools an opportunity to participate, free of charge'. This could have an impact on reducing health inequalities and ensuring every child can be included in residential outdoor education and new learning experiences.

There is some evidence that outdoor education is supportive to children and young people's development in terms of opportunity to participate in a range of physical activity as well as potential broader benefits to their mental health and improved self-esteem and self-confidence.⁸

⁵ https://publichealthwales.shinyapps.io/SHRN_Dashboard/

⁶ Hurter et al. (2022)

⁷ [Centre for Mental Health](#)

⁸ [Nature-based outdoor activities for mental and physical health: Systematic review and meta-analysis - ScienceDirect, Short-Term Exposure to Nature and Benefits for Students' Cognitive Performance: a Review | Educational Psychology Review \(springer.com\)](#),

However, as previously mentioned the direct impact of ‘residential’ outdoor education on a child’s development has not yet been fully established. This is due to the fact the impact is often measured alongside other variables, including length of stay, age of child, residential/non-residential, activity through a society or club and type of learning objectives.

While the direct impact of residential outdoor education by itself is difficult to measure, WIPAHS could be uniquely placed to facilitate an evaluation of a pilot scheme or to monitor the impact of the Bill if it were passed.

Residential Outdoor Education (Wales) Bill: Financial cost

It is acknowledged that Wales is currently facing a difficult financial time. The Welsh Government have firmly expressed the 2024-2025 budget has been developed during the ‘toughest financial situation Wales has faced since the start of devolution’.⁹

It is estimate that the Residential Outdoor Education (Wales) Bill could cost up to £19 million a year. While this not a significant proportion of the budget, during this difficult financial period it could be considered as such.

The value of the Bill could be paid back in preventative intervention, in particular on mental health services, but this would require extensive monitoring.

Research commissioned by the Pembrokeshire Coastal forum demonstrated the value of outdoor tourism, of which residential outdoor education for children and young people formed a part of. They estimated that outdoor tourism brought £26.54 million of value to the mental health sector¹⁰. However, it is worth noting that this research is wider than residential outdoor education and specific preventative savings of residential outdoor education would require more in-depth research before RCPCH could say whether it would have a defined cost benefit.

If the Welsh Government believes the Bill is too expensive to deliver, RCPCH Wales would welcome the aspirations of the Bill to be incorporated

⁹ <https://www.gov.wales/wales-2024-to-2025-draft-budget>

¹⁰ https://www.pembrokeshirecoastalforum.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Economic-and-Social-Evaluation-of-the-Outdoor-Activity-Sector-in-Wales_English.pdf

into the new curriculum and for opportunities to expand outdoor education, be it residential or local, for school aged children.

Conclusion

RCPCH Wales supports the aspiration of the Residential Outdoor Education (Wales) Bill. It could be of great benefit to improving Wales's F for physical activity grade, reducing sedentary behaviour, promoting healthy lifestyle choices and having a long-lasting positive impact on children and young people's mental health.

However, RCPCH Wales is aware of the current financial challenges facing the Welsh Government. If the Welsh Government believes the Bill is too expensive to deliver, RCPCH Wales would welcome the aspirations of the Bill to be incorporated into the new curriculum. The Welsh Government should seek to expand opportunities and choices available for children to engage with various outdoor educational activities, be it residential or local, with an emphasis on the importance of physical activity.

About the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health (RCPCH) Wales

The RCPCH works to transform child health through knowledge, innovation and expertise. We have over 600 members in Wales, 22,800 across the UK and worldwide. The RCPCH is responsible for training and examining paediatricians. We also advocate on behalf of members, represent their views and draw upon their expertise to inform policy development and the maintenance of professional standards.

For further information please contact Sarah Williamson, Policy and Public Affairs Manager (Wales), Sarah.Williamson@rcpch.ac.uk

About The Welsh Institute of Physical Activity, Health and Sport (WIPAHS)

At WIPAHS, our primary goal is to respond to questions related to the promotion of health and well-being through physical activity and sport raised by those at the heart of delivering such initiatives and working in the field. We are dedicated to disseminating accessible knowledge across diverse audiences, with a particular emphasis on enhancing visibility and implementation. Through collaboration and co-production, we aim to make a tangible impact on the people of Wales by addressing health inequalities.

For further information please contact the WIPAHS Team wipahs@swansea.ac.uk