



## The Outdoor Community Play Sector in Scotland: Key Results from The Scottish Outdoor Community Play Mapping Survey



Winter 2022

**Thrive**  
**Outdoors**

For a sustainable Scotland, where our children and young people can play, learn and thrive outdoors

**INSPIRING**

**SCOTLAND**

At Thrive Outdoors, we are very aware that the Outdoor Community Play Sector has continued to develop, evolve, and adapt to the changing landscape over the past decade, embracing and learning from challenges as well as celebrating the many successes.

Outdoor play plays a crucial role in ensuring the emotional, social, and physical wellbeing of children and young people. Following the covid-19 pandemic and current cost of living crisis it has been more important than ever that outdoor play is available for all children and young people across Scotland.

Research on outdoor play in Scotland is well documented and has predominantly focused on the many benefits of outdoor play and children's views on outdoor play.

The Thrive Outdoors team know the importance of this, however, we also recognise the need to understand the organisations present in the sector. So, in response to this during spring/summer 2022 we launched a survey with the aim of creating a holistic view of organisations in the sector including where and how they operate, as well as the key challenges that they face.

The survey was shared on Thrive Outdoors social media pages and emails were sent to organisations that have previously been involved with funds at Inspiring Scotland. The survey was widely shared, and other national organisations helped to promote the survey beyond the Thrive Outdoors network. In total there were 141 responses to the survey. In addition to the survey, 33 OCP charities who make up the OCP fund portfolio 22/23 took part in a face-to-face session.

This work is made possible by investment from Scottish Government and other investors.

## Key Insights from the Scottish Outdoor Community Play Mapping Survey

### Key Insights



On average, organisations delivered 16 hours of outdoor play each week



On average, 21 children and young people attend each session



Almost 60 trusts and foundations were credited as funding sources of outdoor play



Recruitment is a common issue among the sector, however retention is not



Most paid outdoor play delivery staff are on part-time, zero-hours contracts or other non-full-time contracts



Most organisations have fewer than 5 volunteers in total

### Key Challenges



Increased demand for services for children with ASN



Long term, accessible fundraising



Staff recruitment and wellbeing



Unsafe community spaces that are poorly maintained



Acceptance of outdoor play by parents and communities

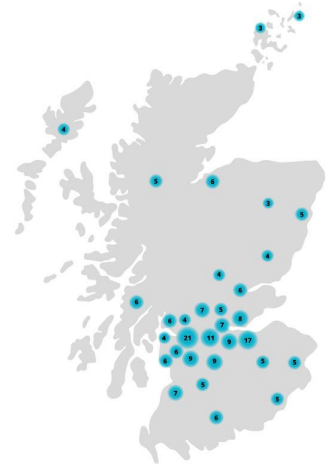


Cost of living crisis



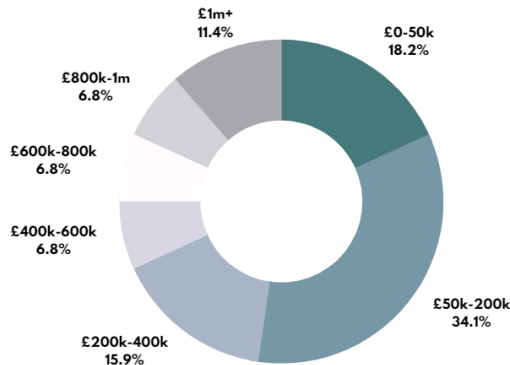
## Location

Outdoor play is happening all over Scotland. However, some locations have significantly more outdoor play provision than others. Glasgow and Edinburgh have the most organisations operating in their cities, but these cities also have high levels of deprivation. Smaller locations such as Inverclyde which also has high levels of deprivation may currently be underserved in outdoor play.



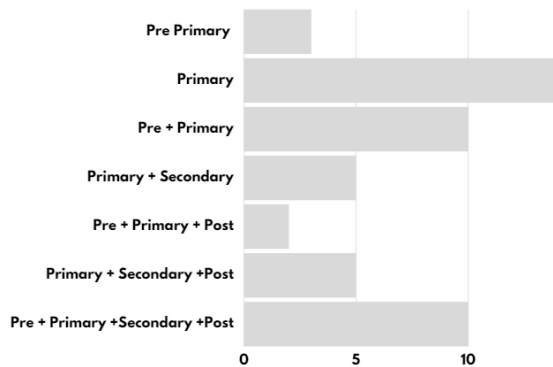
## Diversity

Organisations delivering outdoor play in Scotland are extremely diverse. There is no one fixed mode of delivery and organisations vary in their scope and scale. Some organisations work with large numbers of children on an infrequent basis, whilst others provide multiple sessions weekly to smaller numbers of individuals.

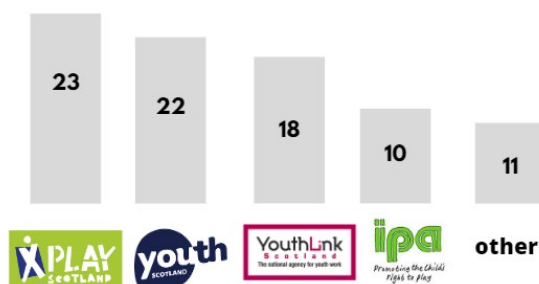


Organisations surveyed also vary in terms of their structure. Around 52% of organisations had annual incomes of less than £200,000 pa whilst 11% have an annual income of £1m+. Baseline: 141

Additionally, organisations target a wide range of delivery age groups. Primary school children are best served in the sector, however, there are many organisations working with older and younger children.



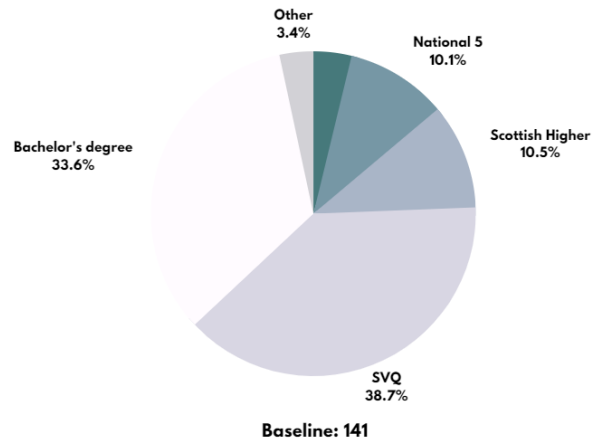
Furthermore, organisations are members of a wide range of membership bodies. The most common membership was with Play Scotland. The vast range of membership bodies indicates the different goals of outdoor play organisations. It also indicates the opportunities these organisations have for wider support.



## People

The survey revealed that the majority of organisations delivering outdoor play did not have qualification entry requirements for staff. However, this did not mean that staff did not have qualifications with many having SVQs and degrees.

Qualifications in play appeared to be less important for organisations in the sector, with several citing experience and values as more important in hiring staff.



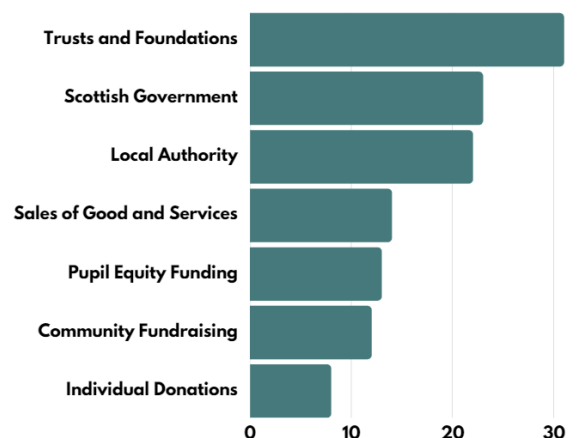
**Recruitment** of staff appeared to be a bigger issue than the retention of staff. With the majority of staff on part time, sessional and/or short-term fixed contracts the ability to attract new entrants is difficult for many. However, for those already engaged in the sector the benefits to working in outdoor community play are rich; directly seeing the impact of the work that results in those working in the sector not choosing to leave even with the job insecurity.

**Volunteers** were also used by a large number of organisations. Typically volunteers were slightly younger(14-18yrs) and slightly older(30-40yrs) than paid staff. For many organisations young volunteers have been young people who had benefited from their organisation, while the slightly older volunteers in their 30s and 40s were parents of children involved. The use of volunteers in the sector highlights the opportunity to involve the local community directly in community play sector. This has also strengthened the relationship and trust between organisations and the community as well as enabling a deeper understanding of the communities' needs.

## Challenges

The biggest challenge for organisations was **funding**, including access to and retainment of. Organisations rely on various sources of funding including grants from trusts and foundations, the selling of goods and services, and community donations.

Applying for grants represented a big challenge for organisations and through the survey almost 60 trusts and foundations were used as sources of funding for the outdoor play sector. Charities received funding from:



Organisations stated that the **short-term** nature of funding proved to be the main challenge. They found that they were in constant cycles of applying for funding and reporting to grant providers. One organisation argued that the challenges with funding were heightened by many organisations all applying for the same pots

of funding. Some organisations also suggested that they found it more difficult to get funding for longer running projects, with new projects appearing more attractive to funders. For those receiving long term investment stated that this has enabled them to build deeper trust and support in the community which was viewed as a significant factor in successful delivery of outdoor play.

Other organisational challenges related to staff **recruitment** and **retainment**, including issues with recruiting volunteers. The majority of respondents found that staff remain within their organisation for 2+ years, and 35% of respondents were able to retain staff for 5+ years. **Skill-level and wellbeing** of staff were also recorded as challenges. While challenges to staff wellbeing were connected to the pandemic, COL, and job insecurity. Survey responses indicated that this job insecurity stems from instability short term nature of funding and the inability to plan long-term. Although some organisations are unable to offer any wellbeing support due to the size of the organisation and limited capacity, other have found ways to provide benefits to employees that support their wellbeing. Organisations like Outlet: Play Resource are offering flexible working arrangements, travel expenses, and a wellbeing hour to each staff member during their working week. Others are committed to ensuring the basic needs of employees are met by ensuring the office remains heated and allowing access to a community fridge. Other organisation such as The Yard and PEEK offer healthcare benefits to employees and have access to an employee assistance programme.

Due to the **cost-of-living crisis**, environmental factors such as weather have become increasingly challenging for organisations and families. Although most organisations offer outdoor play sessions regardless of the weather this does not always mean that children and parents have the means to attend. Some organisations are mitigating this by providing outdoor clothing and offering hot meals and drinks to ensure families can fully participate. More recently, we have learned that concerns over laundry costs are also deterring families from participating in outdoor play.

*"Will we be able to keep up with demand? Can our staff/volunteers do this without burning out? Can we afford to open later and provide food? Will funders be flexible in increasing budgets and salaries in line with inflation?"*

*Kingsway Community Connections*

Other challenges included a **lack of acceptance from the community** for outdoor play. Some organisations work directly with the community, knocking on doors and explaining the importance of outdoor play to those that may be hostile to groups of children gathering outdoors. Stakeholder involvement is key to gaining acceptance and allowing children to thrive outdoors.

*"[We are located in a] very urban environment, city centre with busy streets all around us. We visit a local park but have had negative comments from other community members who see the children as noisy and disruptive using this space."*

*Midsocet Playgroup*

Another prominent environmental challenge was the **lack of green space** for some communities. With the increase in building developments there has been a loss of space in some areas. While others faced challenges with getting access to green spaces from the local council. Additionally, even when green spaces are available, they are not well maintained. Dog foul and litter were mentioned by several organisations as causing challenges to the **health and safety** of outdoor play. Several organisations try to overcome this by arranging their own litter picking, but local authorities should be kept aware of this so that spaces can be appropriately looked after.

*"The main challenge that we have faced has been the site itself. As previously mentioned, we carry out the sessions in a public field/park area, which is one of very*

*few green spaces in the community. The site is often used by dog walkers, who often don't pick up after their dogs. There is also often a lot of litter, including glass bottles, in and around the site. We have tackled this by taking our own bin bags, litter pickers, and dog poo bags in order to make the area as safe and clean as possible before the children arrive each session. The children and members of the community have also been instrumental in trying to keep the area clean by talking to their peers about littering." St Pauls Youth Forum*

We believe it is our shared responsibility to support and enable all of Scotland's children and young people to access our diverse open spaces and to empower them to enjoy these spaces for the purposes of playing, learning, and fostering a connection to the environment. Our vision is for a sustainable Scotland where our children and young people can play, learn, and thrive outdoors.

This report will be used to guide the Thrive Outdoors strategy and fund in supporting outdoor play organisations in its network and portfolio.

Thrive Outdoors will continue to support communities, charities, schools, outdoor organisations, public bodies, investors, and Scottish Government to collaborate, innovate and develop in outdoor play and learning, sharing best practice and feeding into research to promote better understanding of the importance of outdoor play, alongside influencing and informing policy.



Networking and best practice sharing events



Resource emails and newsletters



Introducing organisations with complementary skills/ experience



Practitioner tips and podcasts

We want every child in Scotland to be happy, healthy, resilient, and have the best possible start in life. We want them to be able to form friendships, learn new skills and have fun. And we are committed to use our experience to support charities, and their governance, whilst empowering and equipping families, childcare professionals, play workers and educators with the confidence, enthusiasm, and skills to encourage and support our children and young people to play, learn and thrive outdoors.

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## INSPIRING SCOTLAND

Registered Office:  
Suite 2,  
14 New Mart Road,  
Edinburgh,  
EH14 1RL

T. 0131 442 8760  
E. [enquiries@inspiringscotland.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@inspiringscotland.org.uk)

[www.inspiringscotland.org.uk](http://www.inspiringscotland.org.uk)



Scottish Government  
Riaghaltas na h-Alba  
[gov.scot](http://gov.scot)