

Report of a Youth Inspection

Woodhall Outdoor Learning Centre

June 2025



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1. INTRODUCTION

A. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Woodhall Outdoor Learning Centre (OLC) is located close to Kilrea in County Londonderry and is managed by the Education Authority (EA) as part of the regional Outdoor Learning Service (OLS). The accommodation at Woodhall OLC caters for residential groups of up to 51 people including young people and accompanying staff within the main building and adjoining bungalow.

The programmes offered by the centre are available across seven days a week throughout the year and consist of both residential and day visit learning experiences. Programmes are accessed by primary, post-primary and special schools, voluntary and statutory youth groups, education other than at school (EOTAS) centres and Further Education colleges. During the 2024-2025 financial year, 144 groups consisting of 2,917 young people engaged in the programmes.

The centre has onsite access to a natural lake, climbing wall, high ropes course, wilderness village and team challenge activities. The proximity to the North Coast and River Bann provides young people with opportunities to engage in coasteering, canoeing and other paddle sport activities. Mountain biking is also offered within the local forest trails.

The centre specialises in the development of group work to support both the youth service and Northern Ireland schools' curricula. In addition, the centre provides support for the delivery of group work and youth work training for youth workers.

The staff team is led by a deputy operations manager. At the time of the inspection, the instructor team comprised two full-time outdoor learning instructors, two part-time outdoor learning instructors and a Pathway to Professional Youth Work Programme (Pathways) youth worker in charge. The in-house team includes one administrator, four catering staff, two housekeeping staff, a store manager and a buildings supervisor.

At the time of the inspection the centre was providing outdoor learning experiences for pupils from two primary schools and one special school.

B. VIEWS OF YOUNG PEOPLE, PARENTS AND STAFF

The young people who spoke with the inspectors highlighted the fun they were having, the outdoor skills they had learnt, and the importance of teamwork and communication when working with one another. They enjoyed taking part and felt safe and secure while embarking on new and challenging activities. The young volunteer instructors spoke of the transferable skills they were developing and how their experiences were preparing them for future learning and employment.

In discussion with a small number of parents/carers, they told us that their children enjoy attending the youth centre, learning new outdoor skills and making and sustaining friendships with other young people who enjoy outdoor learning activities. They also spoke of how their children's confidence has been developing and that their leadership and communication skills have improved greatly as a result of having opportunities to volunteer in working with young people who attend the centre.

The staff talked about how they work well together as a team and adapt the programmes based on the needs of the individual young people they work with. Through this they enjoy seeing the young people develop their confidence and teamwork through outdoor activities in a safe yet challenging way.

C. THE PROCESS OF INSPECTION

The Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) worked alongside Woodhall Outdoor Learning Centre to consider how well the provision:

- has identified and articulates its vision;
- prioritises actions to achieve the vision;
- overcomes the main challenges it faces;
- monitors and reviews progression to identify, celebrate and embed success; and
- grows and develops an inclusive community of learning.

2. SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

- The staff live out the EA vision and the mission statement of Woodhall Outdoor Learning Centre, appropriately focusing on the holistic development of young people through positive, fun outdoor learning experiences.
- There are robust self-evaluation processes that identify the strengths of the work and appropriate targets for future development.
- The development of the young people's personal, social, emotional and physical skills is prioritised by the staff in the high-quality planning and delivery of the programme of activities.
- Through effective collaboration and pre-engagement with the participating organisations, the staff develop an understanding of the young people's needs and create bespoke programmes to optimise their engagement, learning and enjoyment of the activities.
- The highly skilled and reflective staff continually adapt the learning experiences to challenge the young people to be 'the best that they can be'.
- The staff facilitate ongoing, active participation with all the young people at every stage of the programme, which informs and enhances their individual learning experiences.
- The young people's progress is supported well through structured 'goal-setting', continuous affirmation and the opportunity to take on increasing roles of responsibility.

- The staff capture well the impact of the work on the young people through innovative methods of evaluation and detailed individual case studies.
- Equity is embedded within the learning approaches, with personalised targets enabling individuals to build on 'small wins' to achieve significant growth in their personal development.
- The young people's successes are measured, recorded and celebrated effectively to build their confidence as they develop specific and transferable skills.
- The effective development of young volunteer instructors supports well the participating young people in their activities and contributes to programmes locally and internationally.
- The young volunteer instructors are enabled to co-design, deliver and lead a range of programmes through meaningful collaboration with key stakeholders.
- Through a culture of continuous learning, the staff engage well in self-nominated training and personal development courses that facilitate knowledge-sharing and sustain high-impact practice for the young people.
- At the time of the inspection, the evidence provided by the organisation demonstrates that the arrangements for child protection align to the current statutory guidance. The staff would benefit from training by the EA in adult safeguarding arrangements in the youth environment.

3. MAIN REPORT

A. SETTING THE VISION

The staff of Woodhall OLC have a clear focus and work together as a cohesive team to deliver the EA vision 'To inspire, support and challenge all our children and young people to be the best that they can be'. They are currently reviewing their mission statement to articulate how Woodhall OLC brings their particular strengths and expertise to fulfilling the EA overarching vision. Through self-evaluation and reflective processes, the instructors have identified the importance of positive outdoor learning experiences for young people, that challenge and develop them to build and grow their personal, social, critical thinking, and leadership skills, and connection with the outdoors. In addition to listening to the views of groups visiting the centre, the instructors actively seek out the voice of young people from the active young volunteer instructor group and external stakeholders through their self-evaluation processes, to inform further the direction of the work of the centre going forward.

There are effective and robust self-evaluation processes which recognise the strengths of the work and identify appropriate areas for further development. Detailed action plans outline targets going forward and are reviewed and updated to track progress. Regular team meetings, supervision, monitoring and moderation visits take place. The Curriculum Delivery Agreement is used effectively to identify

need, review and record the impact of the youth work within the centre. The appropriate use of case studies highlights the benefits for individual young people who have engaged in the service. The targets, which align to the EA priorities, clearly relate to the vision for the organisation and are focused on helping young people 'to be the best that they can be'.

B. IMPLEMENTING AND IMPROVING TO ACHIEVE THE VISION

Through practice which appropriately links the thinking skills and personal capabilities from the Northern Ireland Curriculum with the youth work curriculum, the young people, coming to the centre with their school, are challenged and make progress. The staff also use [The Circle of Courage](#) model of belonging, mastery, independence and generosity and cultivate a growth mindset to support the young people in their personal development. The well-planned experiences are tailored initially to the needs of the group through the instructors engaging with schools to identify the desired aims and learning outcomes with the teachers. During the residential or day experience, each activity is then adapted to appropriately challenge and develop each individual young person. Through this individualised approach, the young people experience new ways of learning and make progress, achieving things that they never thought they were capable of. The curriculum offer has recently been developed to support cultural diversity and equity for all, such as, through the 'Woodtopia' experience, which immerses young people in the realities of displaced asylum seekers, deepening their empathy and understanding of the experiences of newcomers to Northern Ireland.

The young people are highly motivated while engaging in the activities and are developing confidence, independence, teamwork and trust through developing their skills and taking risks in a safe space. Their voice is captured effectively through the choices they make, informing both the programme activities and the associated levels of difficulty, reflecting well a responsive and adaptive approach deployed by the instructors. Through highly challenging activities, the young people are focused on working with others and forming trusting relationships with their peers, resulting in high levels of mutual support, encouraging one another to achieve and exceed their individual goals and building courage and resilience.

The outdoor instructors are highly skilled in their engagements with the young people, and interactions are considered and intentionally focused on developing the young people's personal, social, emotional and physical skills. They allow opportunities for the young people to problem-solve and develop mediation skills as they work in engaging team activities. The instructors have high expectations for the young people and work closely with the teachers and support staff from the participating schools to ensure that the young people are challenged in line with their abilities. Through their shared vision for young people, the centre staff observe and intervene appropriately to support the young people who may find the residential experience difficult, with the result that the young people often continue to engage in the experience.

The instructors carry out continuous reflection on their youth work practice and the young people's progress throughout the sessions, adapting their approaches to ensure successful learning. The instructors engage well in detailed briefings and debriefs before and after working with groups to inform the planning and ensure that

all staff are fully aware of the individual needs of the young people within the group. At the end of activities there is a focused time for reflection with the young people and visiting staff, which informs the planning for the next activity. The instructors also carry out end-of-visit evaluations with the young people, identifying their development of skills and dispositions which are creatively, and age-appropriately, recorded.

There is a strong focus on safety during sessions observed with the safe use of equipment and resources being well managed and appropriate young-person-to-adult ratios being adhered to. The management and staff are accessible during and between activities, including during mealtimes, to support the young people. Partnerships with schools, youth centres, and summer camp providers promote well the health and well-being of the young people, demonstrating an effective holistic approach to education that extends beyond traditional learning environments.

C. BUILDING EQUITY

Access to the service for the young people is determined through an annual, needs-based prioritisation of bookings, supporting fairness and inclusivity. Signposting for the young people to bursaries, where applicable, broadens accessibility by helping to remove financial barriers.

Appropriate adaptations to the curriculum ensure inclusivity, such as the use of photographs alongside maps to aid navigation for young people who struggle with written instructions.

The centre has created an effective indoor sensory space and a sensory garden, complete with reflection hut, to provide a peaceful space where young people can retreat to regulate their emotions.

Equity is embedded well within the learning approach, with personalised 'goal setting' enabling each young person to achieve and build on 'small wins'. Through participation in outdoor activities, which are engaging and motivating, the young people are inspired to push beyond their limits, striving for goals that exceed their expectations while also encouraging their peers to do the same. A positive, 'can do' attitude is nurtured, fostering resilience and determination in achieving their goals. The instructors use praise to uplift and affirm, particularly when the self-esteem of the young person is low, while also recognising when support is needed to help them regulate their emotions. Staff interventions are strategically applied well to support the young people to achieve their goals, reinforcing an effective 'growth mindset' philosophy that underpins the organisation's approach to success and skilfully prepares the young people for the next stage of their learning.

Providing a responsive and supportive environment is at the heart of the centre's approach, with frequent evaluative check-ins between the instructor team and the young people to address emerging risks and create a safe space tailored to each young person's needs. A thriving culture of peer support and encouragement is cultivated, empowering the young people to overcome educational and social barriers.

D. EMBEDDING SUCCESS

Success is defined and embedded by the instructor team through structured processes that support well the young people in achieving their goals. Baseline is accurately established with the young people through pre-residential visits by the centre staff and initial group engagement, enabling progress to be measured from clear starting points. Successes are recorded effectively at key transition points in programmes, reinforcing the impact of the development of the young people's skills and providing tangible evidence of their growth. Successes are highlighted effectively in subsequent activities to build the confidence of the young people and inspire others.

The instructors play a crucial role in fostering success by modelling positive behaviours and providing continuous affirmation through praise and encouragement. The appropriate and ongoing empowering of the young people to take on leadership roles from the outset enables them to take control of their learning and fosters independence and resilience.

Success is celebrated through internal communication systems, staff briefings and debriefs, and social events with the young volunteer instructors. Achievements are recognised and valued at all levels, with public recognition visible through the EA Causeway Coast & Glens Area Youth Service social media channel. In addition, the work of the young people is celebrated visually on posters and digital screens within the youth centre to reinforce key messages of celebration. Further, a small number of the young volunteer instructors accrue [UCAS](#) (Universities and Colleges Admissions Service) points for university entrance and are celebrated and recognised through, for example, [Volunteer Now Impact Awards](#). This recognition highlights well the organisation's commitment to developing the young volunteers and leads to tangible future opportunities, reinforcing the long-term impact of the programmes. The staff's successes are also recognised through investing in people days, reinforcing the value of their contributions and sustaining a culture of continuous improvement.

E. GROWING A COMMUNITY OF LEARNING

There is a strong community of learning cultivated across the staff, young people, and external partners. Strategic and effective staff professional learning opportunities enhance the instructors' ability to build on their skills and continue to work effectively with the young people. Specific training from external agencies and social enterprises, including those working with adults with special educational needs, enables the instructors to support further the young people. The staff distribute their learning across the wider OLS, and practice is informed appropriately by evidence-based research approaches. In addition, the school staff who accompany the young people to the youth centre are engaging in youth work practices that can support and inform further their work with the young people in a formal education setting.

The development of the young volunteer instructors is a strength of the youth centre and plays a key role in sustaining the community of learning. They shadow the staff to develop specific skills and gain appropriate national governing body accreditations, such as archery and orienteering. Notably, over the last two years,

all of the young volunteer instructors attained an OCN Level 1 qualification in youth work. Additionally, they are signposted to a range of opportunities, including training young leaders on the [EA Horizons](#) programme in Annecy, France and working with local youth clubs. Consequently, their inclusion on the relief-staff register facilitates learning within the centre so that it is both sustained and expanded. Their successes are acknowledged and embedded within the wider learning community, enabling these highly valued young leaders to aspire to 'be the best that they can be'.

Environmental partnerships with agencies, such as the Forestry Service and Waterways Ireland, provide opportunities for the young people to engage in sustainable projects with environmental responsibility, including the achievement of the [Eco-school Green Flag](#) award. The centre uses well their strong partnerships with local voluntary organisations and community groups to enhance the leadership development of volunteer instructors, guiding them toward meaningful leadership opportunities. Collaborations with local industry enrich further the activities for the young people's learning in contextualised and relevant ways, such as sourcing and using reconditioned wood to construct red squirrel boxes to promote the population of this endangered species.

F. CHILD AND ADULT PROTECTION

At the time of the inspection, the evidence provided by the organisation demonstrates that the arrangements for child protection align to the current statutory guidance. The staff would benefit from training by the EA in adult safeguarding arrangements in the youth environment. The young people reported that they feel safe in the centre and know who to talk to if they have any worries or concerns.

4. GOING FORWARD

Woodhall Outdoor Learning Centre is living out its vision and mission statement through the highly effective delivery of bespoke, fun programmes which challenge and build the young people's personal and social skills and connection with the outdoors. The staff nurture a positive attitude in the young people, fostering resilience and determination in their journey to success. The ETI will continue to work with Woodhall Outdoor Learning Centre, including to share examples of highly effective practice from which others may learn. The aspects of practice which should be shared more widely are:

- the high levels of participation, in particular, through the young volunteer instructor programme; and
- the skilful delivery of bespoke programmes which are continuously adapted to the changing needs of the individual young people.

Woodhall Outdoor Learning Centre is well placed to take forward the priorities they have identified through their own self-evaluation processes.

5. APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1: QUANTITATIVE TERMS

In this report, proportions may be described as percentages, common fractions and in more general quantitative terms. Where more general terms are used, they should be interpreted as follows:

Almost/nearly all	- more than 90%
Most	- 75% - 90%
A majority	- 50% - 74%
A significant minority	- 30% - 49%
A minority	- 10% - 29%
Very few/a small number	- less than 10%

APPENDIX 2: HEALTH AND SAFETY

1. There is no suitable drying room for outdoor clothing.
2. The steps leading to the front entrance of the main building are in need of repair.

The Education and Training Inspectorate

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