



Out to Play Improvement Programme

Evaluation Report

November 2022



Introduction

This report aims to capture the learning, impact and future implications of the CYPIC Out to Play Improvement Programme, which ran between May 2021 and February 2022.

Why Out to Play?

Despite the growing body of research supporting the positive benefits of spending time outdoors and the knowledge that children are growing up in an increasingly indoor, sedentary world, a number of ELC services struggle to achieve high quality outdoor learning experiences for children.

The Scottish Government ELC Policy vision for outdoor play and learning is: 'Children in Scotland will spend more time involved in high quality outdoor play and learning as part of their early learning and childcare experience. Time outdoors will be equal to or greater than the time they spend indoors and will happen every day, in every setting'

Key drivers to achieve this vision include:

- A skilled and knowledgeable workforce
- High quality outdoor spaces
- A culture which values the outdoors as an integral part of a healthy life
- Sufficient time given to outdoor experiences in every ELC day

CYPIC were approached by policy colleagues to run an improvement programme around this policy vision and through discussion, it became evident that in order for interventions focused on the quality of experiences, such as training courses or CPD events, to have a sustainable impact, we have to address the access issues and ensure sufficient time is actually being spent outdoors first. If being outdoors is not a regular part of a setting's practice, if children are only outdoors for short periods or only in good weather, then training courses on 'what to do outside' will not impact the quality of children's experiences.

Quality Improvement (QI) is ideally placed to support improvement around time outdoors and the implementation of this policy vision into practice. Other interventions, such as Virtual Nature School, are available thereafter to address the other 3 drivers.

What we did

We developed and ran the Out to Play Improvement Programme, based on the Institute for Healthcare Improvement (IHI) Pilot Breakthrough Series Collaborative model. A Pilot Breakthrough Series Collaborative provides an opportunity to test a change theory and measures, and develop a package of changes that work which can then be shared.

Teams focus on an agreed shared aim, are provided with pre-defined measures (Appendix 1) and data collection tools. Workshops are where teams engage and learn about improvement tools and techniques and action periods are where they apply the methodology, with fortnightly peer and improvement advisor support.

Programme design



Our change theory



Who was involved?

Teams were recruited via an application process and subsequent interviews to consider location, setting type and current gap between time outdoors and the aim of 50% of their ELC day. We aimed to have a range of settings that others could identify with and, most importantly, who acknowledged they had room for improvement. This would be a key consideration for future work around Out to Play with a suggestion of baseline data gathering as part of recruitment and identification of settings.

Participants did not need previous experience of QI, and everyone progressed at the same rate, despite having varying levels of QI experience. Seven teams were initially recruited, due to CYPIC capacity to support teams and the importance of teams collaborating in a shared space. One team, who did not go through the application process but instead was identified through policy colleagues to include another urban setting, stopped the programme after session 3. There were internal reasons for this but it could also be attributed to not being recruited in the same way.

Teams were made up of a setting leader or equity and excellence lead and practitioners. One team also included staff from their central Quality Improvement Team to support data collection and reporting. Most teams had on average 2 team members present on workshops. Teams were from a range of urban and rural settings from East Ayrshire, North Ayrshire, Dumfries & Galloway, Glasgow and Edinburgh.

Short descriptions of each setting, why it was important for them to be involved in Out to Play and their original challenges in getting outdoors can be viewed here:

<http://vimeo.com/user/29873961/folder/9469225>

From the clips it is clear that teams had well-trained staff who knew the benefits of being outdoors but this was not translating into children being outdoors. Outdoor areas were resourced and freely accessible from playrooms in all but one setting.

What did they do?

Teams attended 7 workshops and 5 coaching sessions, delivered via the Webex platform. They gathered daily data on the time spent outdoors, children's and staff experience outdoors and regular data on parent's views of outdoor learning.



(staff experience data collection at one setting)



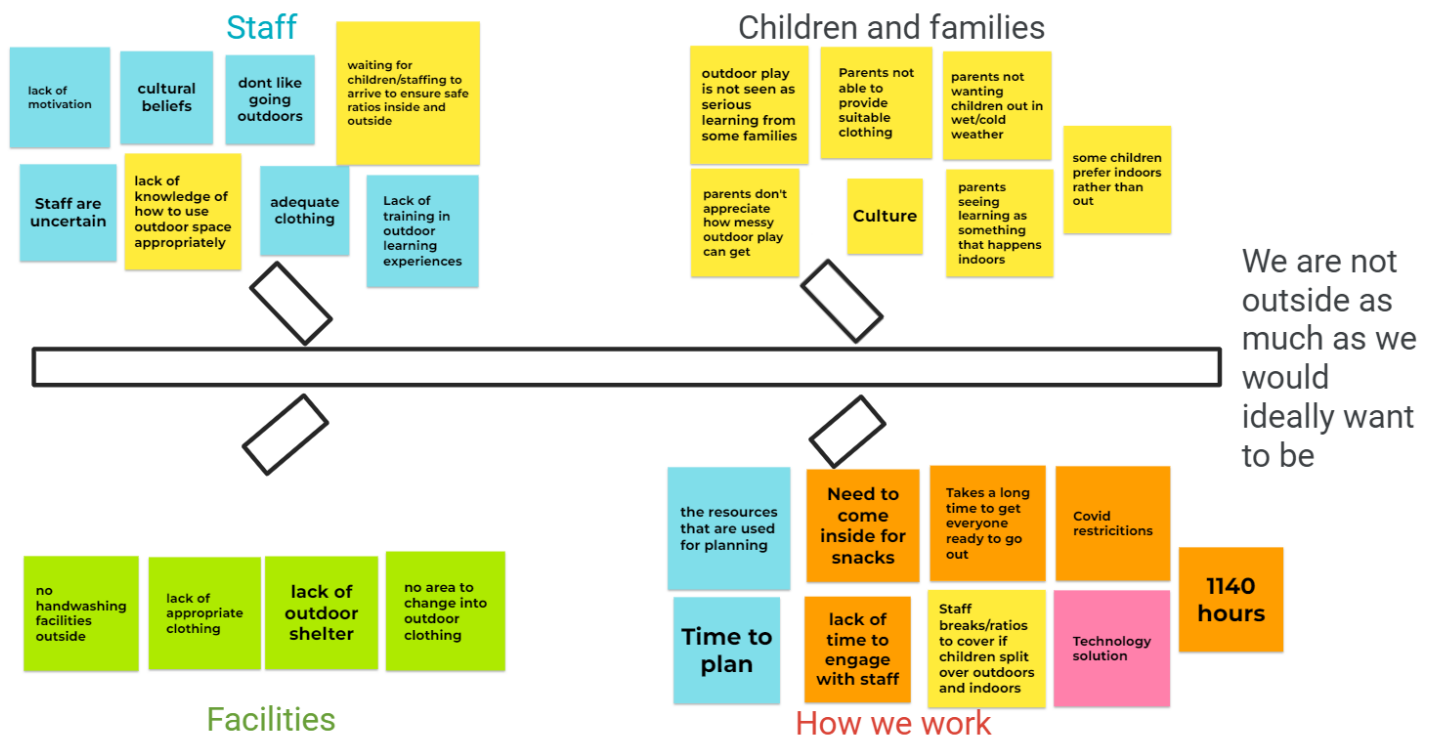
(one setting used 'colour monsters' for children to rate their outdoor experience)

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Time was dedicated to data collection during the first four workshops, which allowed teams to share challenges, help each other with solutions and adapt the measurement plan to work in their setting.

Learning about and subsequently applying QI Tools to understand their own systems and barriers to getting outside was critical in generating change ideas that were aligned to their own root causes. Some common barriers included:

- The organisation and routine of getting suits and boots on.
- Parents not fully appreciating what ‘outdoor clothing’ means and therefore children unequipped.
- Interruption of outdoor play due to snack/meal times.
- Where children registered and entered the setting determined where they spent their initial time at nursery.
- Parents understanding of the benefits of outdoor learning and play.
- Staff motivation due to their time spent outside (rotas).
- Outdoor experiences not being part of planning.



(QI Tool - Fishbone analysis to understand root causes of the problem)

Teams tested change ideas using PDSA cycles. They used their data to determine the success of the tests and iteratively refined the changes until they led to consistent and reliable improvement. This approach was different to starting a multitude of initiatives, with the correct intention, that never led to sustainable improvement. The focus on daily data and a common team purpose was seen as a real advantage and teams reported intentions to apply it across their improvement plans.

The changes that were tested and improved time outside are summarised below and can be viewed in more detail here: <https://vimeo.com/user/29873961/folder/9468271>

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Change ideas:

- Having snack outdoors.
- SWAY infographic detailing what ‘outdoor clothing’ is and the benefits of outdoors issued to parents regularly and when new children start.
- Regular planned walks out with the nursery setting.
- Increase staffing numbers on outdoors.
- Heart-warming box – a box with helpful resources for staff to use as required outdoors, eg spare gloves, handwarmers, hats, kneeling mat etc.
- Staff rota changes – one setting tested staff being outdoors for 3 days one week and 2 days the following week. Another setting tested increasing the time staff were outdoors.
- Reorganising suits and boots to an area at the door and using labelling more effectively
- Outdoor experiences become part of a planning blog for the week.
- Children register at the outdoor gate and begin their nursery session outdoors.



(snack outdoors)



(registration outdoors)

Results and Impact

All teams reported participation, despite the service pressures due to COVID, as a positive experience and progress was not person dependent. Teams reflected the small group discussions supported collaboration and learning and the positive advantage of QI, specifically noting the insights provided by data collection.

“Data made it feel real for me today”
Flowerbank Nursery

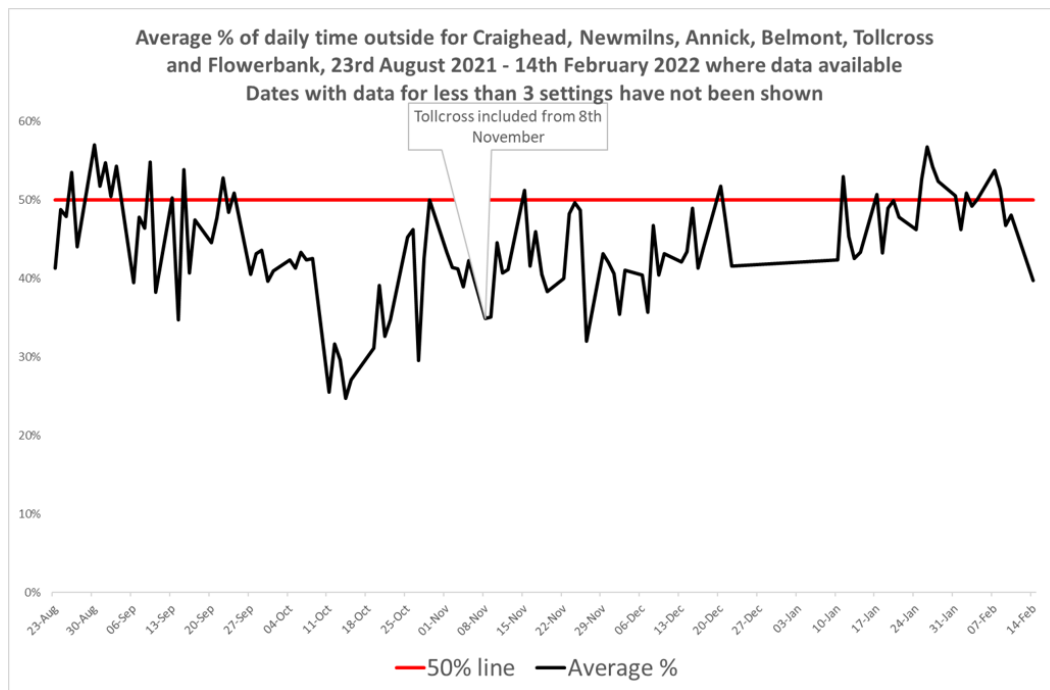
“We will not stop until we reach the aim”
Annick EYC

Once we found the easiest way to collect data, it became part of everyone’s role”
Craighead Nursery

All participating teams implemented and sustained changes that increased their time outside, with 5 of them consistently reaching 50% of the day by the end of the programme. All reflected that participation has helped them change their culture around outdoor play and improve the quality of experiences as well as giving them tools to improve in other aspects.

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The graph below shows the combined data from the six settings. It can be seen that there was a reduction in the variation of time spent outdoors in all settings. It should also be noted that this improvement happened over winter and there was belief among the teams that the levels in summer would be above 50%.



This measure related to the aim was the only one we collated centrally, with process measures on the measurement plan being mostly for local use. Following up with teams in June 2022 revealed high levels of confidence that improvements have been sustained and children remain outdoors for at least 50% of their day.

Visitors to the nursery now always comment how quiet the indoor space is and how engaged children are outdoors” Annick EYC

Freeflow to the outdoors is available all day now, high quality learning experiences are engaging children outdoors and we see this in our floorbooks” Newmilns ECC

The impact of the programme is outlined below but short videos which bring it to life can also be viewed by clicking on this link: <https://vimeo.com/user/29873961/folder/9469225>

Benefits for children

All teams reported that more children are experiencing the benefits of outdoor learning for longer. The benefits observed were social and emotional regulation, children settling more quickly and less disruption to play. The development of gross and fine motor skills was also noted by teams as children were involved in more different play activities. Children were recorded as being engaged in a wider range of play activity. As a result, parents reported improved sleep and eating patterns at home.

With registration being outdoors, and children beginning their day in the garden, parents at one setting reported ‘the calmest drop off experienced at any nursery’ and requested it never goes back to indoor drop off. New children transitioning to the setting have settled

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in quicker than before with less separation anxiety. Another nursery tested out this change idea since the programme finished and by June 2022 reported all groups are now dropped off and collected outdoors and ‘the tweenies have started having breakfast outdoors too’. Babies are outdoors in their pram for daily walks and naps.

Children who wouldn’t naturally choose to be outdoors have been reported to be outdoors more often and for longer. Staff have reported less distressed behaviours from children since being outdoors for longer and will now automatically go outdoors with children who are distressed as this seems to have the best impact. Settings have also created outdoor ‘calm cabins’ or ‘quiet zones’ to help with emotional regulation.

During a feedback session with children at one setting, they mentioned many aspects of outdoors, particularly eating snack outdoors as it means they can play longer without interruption.



One setting noted significant improvements in some children’s speech and language and confidently attributed it to being outdoors engaged in new and different experiences. One child with no garden space at home developed an interest in gardening, growing fruit and vegetables and bug hunts, leading to new language and confidence in communicating with others.



Benefits for Staff

Staff reported an increase in their confidence and motivation to be outdoors as a direct result of changes made to staff rotas and planning to support learning outdoors. Changes

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made to daily routines removed perceived and physical barriers to accessing outdoors. By using quality improvement tools to consider root causes, all teams were able to identify changes that resulted in more time being spent outdoors. Key relationships in teams were developed and settings reported team working had improved as staff had a clearer understanding of roles and responsibilities. Staff felt involved and were leading the changes, it was not directed from management. Settings also reported that the time spent testing changes were not one-off initiatives and the use of QI had allowed them to implement changes and sustain their benefits. As a result, managers who had participated were considering using QI approaches more widely to implement other improvement priorities.

Staff reported feeling 'listened to', 'cared for' and 'more confident to overcome barriers' within their settings. One setting reported their staff completed a questionnaire before and after Out to Play which showed significant improvements in knowledge and confidence around outdoor learning. With routines and planning now supporting children to be outdoors for 50% of the day, staff have reported feeling able to now use the time better to consider and analyse the quality of experiences and where there are opportunities for improvement. Collecting data helped staff to be motivated to continue despite the operational pressures and competing priorities. Data was used to focus and connect staff to and with improvement. One setting has reported still collecting data out with the programme to support evidencing their improvement plan.

By using QI Tools to understand the barriers and challenge assumptions, staff realised changes can be tested in a small scale, minimal risk way before implementing. For example, with staff shortages, one setting would quickly default to 'closing the outdoors' as it could not be covered by staff, resulting in a significant reduction in time spent outdoors. Through testing different areas to close and limiting choice, the outdoor area is never closed, and children are spending longer outdoors. When choices are limited due to pressures, the outdoors is not compromised.

Following up with teams in June revealed further insights around staff teams reflecting on what they do and why when they are outdoors and 'the programme has made everyone more open to discussing practice and questioning changes that could be possible'. A setting reported the Excellence and Equity Lead had been encouraging outdoor play for 3 years with limited success but feels Out to Play has taken it to a sustainable level where other practitioners have fully embraced it and want it to sustain, it is not person dependent and she can step back. All settings reported staff motivation as a contributing barrier to being outdoors, but by June, all teams commented that staff motivation had increased.

"You can see the difference in their mood and wellbeing, they want to be outdoors now"
Flowerbank ECC

"During staff appraisals, the outdoors was mentioned as a positive aspect of life at Craighead, staff feel the benefit on a personal and professional level"

"Staff are using the garden in different and creative ways now, and being outdoors has become a valued part of our nursery life" Kirktonholme

Sharing Learning

Teams have shared their learning with a variety of audiences including local Outdoor Learning Networks, SSSC QI Network, National Strategic Forum and our own CYPIC Early Learning Exchange and National Learning Session. The Minister for Children and Young People, Ms Clare Haughey, visited one of the settings to see and hear about the impact of the programme.



Publishing this report allows the learning to be shared more widely across the ELC sector given that there were such positive and sustained improvements to time outdoors, quality of outdoor play and learning and wellbeing for staff and children.

Conclusions

This programme contributes to the evidence base supporting the wide-ranging benefits of outdoor learning and focussing on increasing the time initially, which then allows a focus on quality. This report and the resources developed through the programme will provide valuable tools for ELC settings who wish to improve their practice as well as information for ELC policy when considering future national actions to support the sector in this area.

Despite it being small scale with only 6 teams, they were diverse and representative of settings across the country. They demonstrated an increase in their ability to integrate the use of quality improvement within their practice in relation to time outside and more broadly within Early Learning and Childcare.

[Realising the Ambition: Being Me](#) and the Curriculum for Excellence already support and encourage learning through play across the early level. However, an important point to note is that parents at more than one setting have expressed concerns at more than one setting about their child transitioning into Primary 1 and no longer being outdoors for at least half of their day. In particular, those children who have benefitted most in terms of their emotional regulation.

One of the key policies that should improve this, by influencing time outdoors in school, is the [Learning for Sustainability Action Plan](#). An updated plan will be published in Spring 2023. Outdoor learning is one of the key elements of the action plan and is recognised as a driver to successfully embed Learning for Sustainability across the curriculum.

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Appendix 1: Measurement plan

What are we going to measure?	Why measure this?	What does this mean and how will we measure it?	When / how often?
Average time spent outdoors each session	So that we can see if we are making progress towards our aim.	<p>This should measure the actual time children are spending outdoors (not the amount of time it was theoretically possible to be outside).</p> <p>There are 2 approaches to measuring this, depending on whether you have groups going outside altogether or you have free flow in your setting.</p> <p>1. Groups – record what time that the whole group gets outside and the time they start to come back inside and work out the total amount of time outside in minutes. If they go out more than once in the session add the times together. (Also note the number of children in the group.)</p> <p>2. Free flow - record the actual time spent outdoors over the whole session for a sample of 5 children. Examples of how to get the sample:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One key worker recording all their children's activity in a session. • The first 5 children to arrive in the morning. • Select every 3rd child on the register for example (pick appropriate number). • It's best if the sample is selected on the same basis each session (e.g. one key worker, from register or whatever method). It doesn't matter if the same children are included or not – the important thing is that it gives an indication of what is going on and that children aren't chosen based on knowledge of their activities. • Track the children being sampled for the whole session.. note down each time a child goes outdoors and back in, and work out the total time in minutes each child spent outdoors in a session by adding up the times. 	Per Session (i.e. there will be data for each morning and each afternoon)

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What are we going to measure?	Why measure this?	What does this mean and how will we measure it?	When / how often?
Time spent preparing to get outdoors each session	We can understand how routines effect access to the outdoors.	<p>Record the actual time spent equipping children to be outdoors including clothing, footwear, resources food and safety.</p> <p>As above, there will be 2 approaches to measuring this, depending on whether you have groups going outside altogether or you have free flow to outside in your setting.</p> <p>1. Groups – record what time that the whole group starts getting ready to go out and the time the group actually goes outside, and work out total time to get ready. If the group goes out more than once in the session calculate it each time and add together to get a total time for getting ready in the session. Also record the number of children in the group.</p> <p>2. Free flow - record the actual time spent getting ready over the whole session for the same children in the sample of children that you are recording time outside for. If children go out more than once in the session calculate it each time and add together to get a total time spent getting ready for each child.</p>	Per Session
Number of different play types engaged in when outdoors	We can explore whether the range of play opportunities influences time outside	Record the different types of play observed outdoors during one outdoors visit. This can be done using the sheet attached and marking which play types are seen. Count the total number.	Pick one hour per week of outdoors play to record this
Percent of children having a good experience outdoors	It's important to understand that children enjoy their time outside	At the end of each session ask children to rate how much they enjoyed their time outside. This could be done using smiley faces and sad faces or another way of collecting feedback from children. Record the totals for each feedback category (e.g. number with happy face/ sad face or number who say it was great/ ok / bad). This can be used to calculate the % that were positive.	Per Session

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What are we going to measure?	Why measure this?	What does this mean and how will we measure it?	When / how often?
Percent of parents who are positive about children going outside	We can understand if parents attitudes to outdoor learning is changing.	To capture parents' views, we would like to test the following options: (a) if any comment or conversation is made about going outside, record what is said and whether positive or negative [?phone, in person, social media, email?] (b) as ask for views on how happy parents are with the amount of time children are going outside [happy / too much/ too little?] as arrive or leave and record the answers.	Weekly
Percentage of Early Years Workers rating time outside as positive	We can understand if staff experience of outdoor is changing and therefore if it is impacting on time outdoors	We would like to look at how to measure the experience of early years workers about being outdoors. For example, it could be done by: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Collecting tokens in jars for positive or negative experience of outdoors. Small survey or comment box in staff room Text message to staff asking question 	Daily
Number of Accidents recorded.	A balancing measure to check whether spending more time outdoors increases the number of accidents .	The total number of accidents that take place per week. At the end of each week, count the number of accidents that have been recorded in the accident book that week. This should be the total number both indoors and outdoors.	Weekly

Appendix 2: Types of Play

