

Working Amongst the Rushes and Reeds: A Case Study

Reflecting on What Helps Schools and Communities Work Together for Sustainability

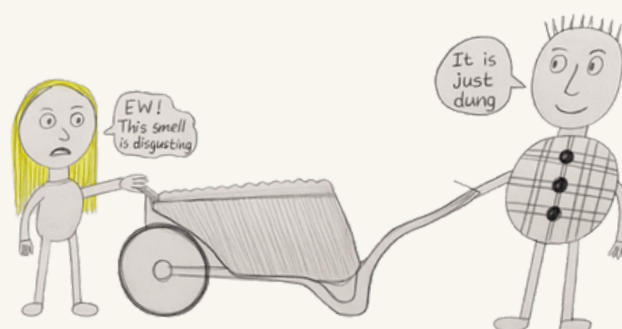
This case study was developed by Children's Parliament in collaboration with the teachers and children of Leswalt Primary School, as part of Phase 3 of the Learning for Sustainability project with the Scottish Government. This phase builds on previous work by placing a strong emphasis on children's voices, rights, and lived experiences as central to developing sustainable education practices. Through creative and participatory approaches, Children's Parliament worked closely with schools to explore how Learning For Sustainability can be meaningfully embedded across the curriculum—reflecting local context, encouraging care for the natural world, and supporting children to see themselves as active contributors to a fairer, more sustainable future. This case study shares the outcomes of that collaboration and highlights how sustainability, rights, and place-based learning can come together to create meaningful change in school communities.



Amongst The Rushes and Reeds

Leswalt Primary School in Dumfries and Galloway has established a long-standing partnership with Aldouran Wetland Garden, a community-run space on land owned by Woodland Trust Scotland. The garden and surrounding woodland are regularly used for cross-curricular outdoor learning, forming an integral part of the school's approach to learning for sustainability. The school's commitment to Learning For Sustainability extends beyond the physical environment. Through regular outdoor engagement, strong partnerships with residents and organisations, and an emphasis on children's participation, Leswalt has created a model where outdoor learning, community connection, and sustainability education are deeply connected. By embedding this approach into everyday school life and grounding it in both local environments and traditions, Leswalt enables sustainability to be both learned and lived. This case study seeks to highlight how schools may uniquely approach the embedding of the Scottish Government's Target 2030 Action Plan within their Learning For Sustainability provision, while upholding children's rights to participate meaningfully in shaping the plan's implementation.

“We’re not just doing jobs, we’re making the Wetland better. It’s like we’re part of what it becomes.”



Children Leading The Way

Leswalt Primary places strong emphasis on children's relationships with offsite learning spaces. The school recognises that children are more engaged when they feel safe, valued, and connected, especially in environments beyond the classroom. Ensuring children's wellbeing and sense of belonging in outdoor spaces is a key priority.

“Being in the wetland feels like it’s ours, not just a place we visit. We help take care of it.”

The school's use of the wetland is grounded in a rights-based approach that reflects children's right to play, to learn in supportive environments, and to have their views heard in matters that affect them. These rights are made tangible through opportunities for children to shape the space—from designing planting areas and signage to proposing future developments. Because their contributions often lead to visible outcomes on the site, children see that their voices have impact and are responded to.

This is further reinforced through voluntary programmes like Wetland Watchers, where pupils take on additional responsibilities for maintenance and observation outside of school hours. These opportunities deepen children's involvement and ownership of the space. In a rural context, where land, community, and identity are closely intertwined, the wetland becomes a place where children's rights are not only respected but actively lived and experienced.

Wading In: Learning In The Wetland Together

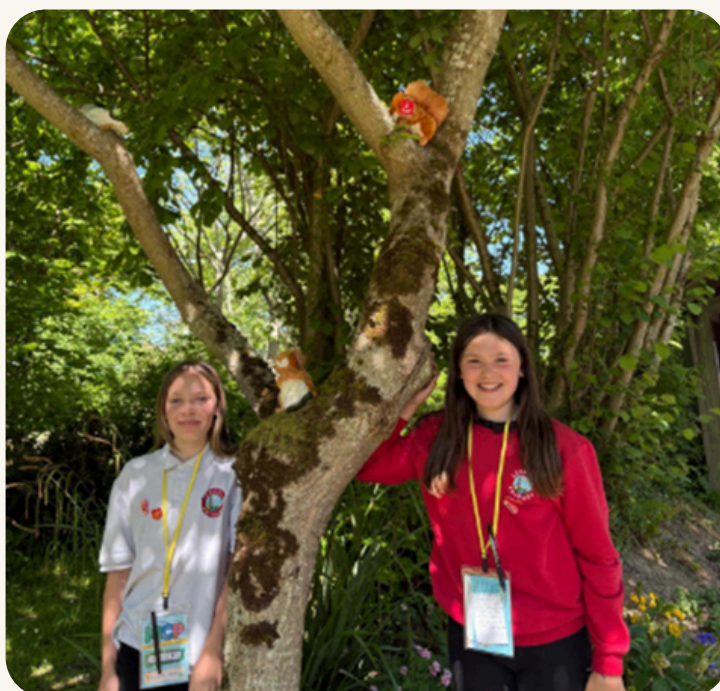
“Sometimes grown-ups come and help us in the wetland. They know loads about plants and birds. We teach each other stuff!”- Child from Leswalt Primary

A key factor of the strong relationship between Leswalt Primary and Aldouran Wetland Garden is the site’s coordinator— who as well as having awarded an MBE for services for in the community also continues to work at the school as a music instructor. Her dual role provides a vital link, supporting communication, the identification of learning opportunities, and ongoing collaboration across staff, pupils, and the wider community. With a deep understanding of both the pedagogical and practical aspects of outdoor education, she ensures that experiences at the wetland are consistent, meaningful, and developmentally rich.

Community capacity-building has also been central. Funding through the wetland project enabled a local volunteer to complete accredited Forest School training through Scotland’s Rural College (SRUC), which included delivering sessions with children. This positioned the wetland as a site not only for children’s learning but also for adult education and skills development.

Building on this foundation, Leswalt partnered with nearby Kirkcolm Primary to co-deliver a Forest School programme, enhancing outdoor learning and collaboration between schools. Children now engage in activities such as pond dipping, forest crafts, den building, and nature identification, while schools benefit from shared resources and expertise.

This collaborative model helps address common challenges in small rural schools, such as limited staff capacity and access to specialist training. By involving community members and supporting professional development, the school has built a wider network of skilled contributors, ensuring continuity and resilience in outdoor learning provision.





Room To Roam: Carving Out Time For Outdoor Learning

“Pond dipping is my favourite because you never know what you’ll find. We caught a newt once, and I didn’t even know they lived here!”

At Leswalt Primary, outdoor learning is made possible by a clear and consistent commitment to creating dedicated time and space. Rather than one-off activities, visits to the wetland and other outdoor experiences are embedded into the weekly structure.

This is supported by Fresh Air Friday, an initiative co-designed by staff and children that sets aside time each week for outdoor learning throughout the year. These regular sessions allow children to return to familiar environments, observe seasonal changes, and deepen their sense of connection to place.

“Fresh Air Friday is the best part of the week. We know it’s our time to be outside and learn in the fresh air—even when it’s a bit rainy!”

Beyond the wetland, the school maintains established patterns of local community events, such as Easter celebrations, cross-country runs, and Christmas concerts in the village hall. These traditions help anchor the school in local life and offer valuable opportunities for learning through community participation.

While tradition brings a wealth of connection and continuity, the school also acknowledges the need to create space for children to lead and shape their own interests. Within the broader Learning For Sustainability landscape, this means supporting pupils to identify what matters to them and to take ownership of new activities, ideas, and events—ensuring the school’s learning environment remains inclusive and child-led.

Roots and Shoots: Intergenerational Learning and Community Links

The wetland's status as a shared community space opens the door to broader collaboration. Local groups including the rotary club, cancer support charities, woodland conservation initiatives, and disability organisations use the site, creating opportunities for the school to connect children with real-world causes and diverse perspectives.

These interactions support global citizenship and curriculum development, offering meaningful, place-based contexts for learning. The school's partnership with the Wetland Watchers, a local volunteer group, further introduces an intergenerational element to learning. Children work alongside adults to maintain the garden, gaining insights into local ecology, history, and sustainable land care.



Sustaining What Works: Lessons from a Place-Based Approach

“We get to say what we want to do and then help plan it. It makes it feel more ours, like we’re not just being told what to do.”

The partnership between Leswalt Primary School and Aldouran Wetland Garden demonstrates how outdoor learning can be integrated into school life in a sustainable and impactful way. This success is built on proximity, regularity, pupil voice, community collaboration, and a long-term commitment to shared learning.

This case study contributes to the broader goals of the Scottish Government’s Learning For Sustainability 2030 Action Plan, showing how small rural schools can lead the way in developing embedded, rights-based, and community-connected approaches to learning for sustainability.

Counting The Chickens Before They've Hatched: A Case Study

Reflecting On Outdoor Learning Through the Chicken Coop

This case study was developed by Children's Parliament in collaboration with the teachers and children of Kirkcolm Primary School, part of Phase 3 of the Learning For Sustainability project with the Scottish Government. This phase builds on previous work by placing a strong emphasis on children's voices, rights, and lived experiences as central to developing sustainable education practices. Through creative and participatory approaches, Children's Parliament worked closely with schools to explore how learning for sustainability can be meaningfully embedded across the curriculum—reflecting local context, encouraging care for the natural world, and supporting children to see themselves as active contributors to a fairer, more sustainable future. This case study shares the outcomes of that collaboration and highlights how sustainability, rights, and place-based learning can come together to create meaningful change in school communities



Opening The Hatch

“I like that it’s not just a one-time thing. The chickens are always there, and we keep looking after them every year.”

At Kirkcolm Primary School in Dumfries and Galloway, the introduction of a chicken coop has become a meaningful part of the school’s approach to learning for sustainability. What began as a locally supported idea has grown into an everyday feature of school life, rooted in real responsibility and care. The project reflects a rights-based approach, recognising children not only as learners but as active participants with the right to be involved in decisions that affect their environment and education.

This case study explores how the school developed the coop in partnership with the community, how it is now embedded in the curriculum and daily routines, and how it offers a slower, more reflective model for learning—one that supports sustainability not just as a topic, but as a way of being, thinking, and doing within school life. It seeks to highlight how schools may uniquely approach the embedding of the Scottish Government’s Target 2030 Action Plan within their Learning For Sustainability provision, while upholding children’s rights to participate meaningfully in shaping the plan’s implementation.



Having Free Range

The success of the chicken coop and broader outdoor learning at Kirkcolm Primary is closely tied to the school’s location and its strong connection to the surrounding environment. Situated between the farmland of rural Dumfries and Galloway and the shores of Loch Ryan, the school is uniquely placed to benefit from immediate access to open green spaces, bodies of water, natural habitats, and quiet rural surroundings. This setting allows outdoor learning to be a seamless part of the school day, without the need for additional planning, transport, permissions, or associated costs that might be required elsewhere. Children and teachers can move easily between the classroom and outdoor spaces, making activities such as forest school sessions, gardening, nature walks, and habitat exploration part of everyday learning.

Crucially, this proximity has helped build a sense of familiarity and trust, both in the use of these spaces and in children’s confidence navigating them. Because the environment is so integrated into school life, children view the outdoors not as an occasional learning space, but as an extension of their classroom. Staff also feel confident using these areas regularly and responsively, supporting a flexible and child-led approach to outdoor learning.

The chicken coop, located within the school grounds, is part of this wider culture. It provides a space where care, observation, and responsibility are embedded into daily routines with minimal barriers to access. Together, these elements reflect an approach to learning that is grounded, accessible, and deeply connected to place.

Setting Up The Coop

The chicken coop at Kirkcolm Primary School was developed through strong collaboration with the local community. The idea emerged from discussions between staff and children, who identified chicken rearing as a valuable addition to outdoor learning. The project aligned with the school's agricultural setting and offered children an opportunity to explore real-world skills and potential future pathways in farming. After sharing the idea locally, the school received generous donations of materials including wood, fencing, and roofing, along with tools and practical support. The school was also fortunate enough to receive a small amount of funding from the local windfarm. This community contribution enabled the project to move forward with minimal funding, drawing on local knowledge and resources.

Community support has continued beyond the initial construction, with ongoing offers of advice, materials, and assistance with care. By engaging the community from the outset, the school has fostered a strong sense of shared ownership and long-term commitment to the project.

From Counting Eggs To Climate Conversations

The chicken coop serves as a daily context for meaningful, cross-curricular learning. It supports numeracy through practical tasks such as measuring feed, counting and tracking egg production, and managing simple budgets. Science curriculums emerge naturally through the study of life cycles, ecosystems, and the impact of weather and climate on animal behaviour, as well as providing a stimulus for literacy and creative tasks.

The coop also creates space for conversations about sustainability and ethics, with children exploring where food comes from, how animals are cared for, and how resources are used. They run a small-scale social enterprise by selling eggs locally to families and neighbours, with profits reinvested into maintaining the coop. This real-world model helps pupils understand sustainability not just in environmental terms, but as something that includes economy, community, and long-term care. These themes link directly to Kirkcolm's wider work on global citizenship and broader learning for sustainability themes.

Importantly, the chicken coop provides a meaningful platform for children to exercise their rights, particularly their right to be heard and to take part in decisions that affect their lives. Children are involved in shaping how the coop is run—deciding on routines, problem-solving around challenges, and helping determine how income from egg sales is used. These decisions are often taken forward through the school's eco club, where pupils take on leadership roles and work collaboratively to plan and monitor the project.

This approach does more than strengthen the learning experience—it reflects a wider commitment to children's participation as a core part of school life. The coop becomes a shared space where children practice decision-making, care, and responsibility in real contexts. It demonstrates how learning environments can respect and uphold children's rights, supporting them not just as learners, but as active ecological citizens within their school and community.



When The Cockerel Crows

The chicken coop also challenges conventional ideas of school time and routine. Operating on a rhythm shaped by the needs of living animals rather than the school timetable, it introduces a slower, steadier pace of learning—one where consistency, care, and responsiveness take priority over speed or completion.

Through daily responsibilities like feeding, cleaning, and checking for eggs, children come to understand that some tasks cannot be rushed. Animal care requires ongoing attention, and in returning to the same duties each day, they learn the value of endurance.. This repeated engagement builds habits of observation and reflection. Children notice subtle changes, shifts in behaviour, weather impacts, or patterns in egg-laying, developing a deeper awareness of their environment and the responsibilities tied to it.

The unpredictability of working with live animals also demands flexibility. A missed feeding, sudden weather changes, or a visit from a fox require immediate, thoughtful responses. These moments invite children to adapt, solve problems, and make real-time decisions—experiences that do not always fit neatly into scheduled learning but build practical, transferable skills. The coop also creates natural pauses in the day with unstructured moments of curiosity, conversation, and quiet attention. Over time, children become more attuned to seasonal rhythms, recognising how daylight, temperature, and climate shape both animal and human routines. Through this, they gain a more grounded understanding of the natural world and their role within it, while also beginning to question the assumed hierarchy between humans and animals.

Ultimately, the chicken coop demonstrates that outdoor learning need not rely on novelty or fast-paced activity. It shows the importance of repetition, patience, and long-term engagement and invites schools to consider how flexible, responsive approaches to time can support deeper, more meaningful learning for all children.

A Child's Perspective On Chickens

At Kirkcolm Primary, the chicken coop has become a familiar and valued part of school life. Children speak about it with a sense of ease, enjoyment, and ownership, describing routines like feeding, cleaning, and checking for eggs as purposeful and rewarding. For many, the physical nature of the work is a highlight. They enjoy being outdoors, getting muddy, and taking on real responsibilities that feel different from classroom tasks.

“It’s proper work. You have to feed them, clean the coop and make sure everything’s right. I like that we get to do it ourselves.”

Children also discuss the unpredictability that keeps looking after chickens interesting. They often mention the small surprise of finding out how many eggs have been laid—sometimes none, sometimes more than expected. That daily variation adds a sense of curiosity and anticipation to what might otherwise be seen as repetitive tasks.

“You never know how many eggs there’ll be. Sometimes it’s none, sometimes it’s loads. It makes it exciting.”

For some children, especially those without pets at home, the chickens feel like part of the school community—familiar faces they look forward to seeing each day. This consistency brings comfort, and the coop is described as something permanent, not just a passing project.

“They’re like our school pets. I don’t have any animals at home, so I really like seeing them every day.”

Alongside the routine and care, children recognise the trust placed in them. They understand that they are relied upon to take care of the chickens properly. This trust, and the responsibility that comes with it, is something they take seriously.

“The teachers trust us to take care of them. They know we can do it. That makes me feel proud.”

Importantly, children don’t see the coop as a one-time experience. They know the chickens will be there throughout their time at school, and they speak about that continuity as something that matters.

“I like that it’s not just a one-time thing. The chickens are always there and we keep looking after them every year.”



Blue and Brown Eggs

What distinguishes this project is its capacity to push the boundaries of traditional schooling while remaining grounded, accessible, and replicable. It offers a bold reimagining of what learning environments can look like, yet it does so in a way that feels practical and familiar. Rather than requiring significant financial investment or advanced technology, the project relies on time, care, and sustained commitment.

Although the initiative is rooted in a single school context, it prompts broader reflection: how might similar approaches be adapted in urban environments or in schools without access to a chicken coop? Can other settings create meaningful opportunities for children to engage in care, responsibility, and connection with the natural world?

The Farmyard

Kircolm Primary School offers a clear, grounded example of how learning for sustainability can be meaningful, accessible, and embedded in daily school life. The chicken coop brings together curriculum, community, and care in a way that reflects the school's values and setting. It demonstrates that with trust in children, strong local relationships, and a commitment to learning through real-world experience, schools can create place-based opportunities that support both education and wellbeing. The approach taken at Kircolm—shaped by time, collaboration, and meaningful links to learning—may offer a useful way of thinking about outdoor learning more broadly.

This case study was written as part of a larger investigation with children from Kircolm and Leswalt Primary into their relationship with, and experiences of, Learning For Sustainability in their schools, with a focus on the Four Contexts for Learning and the Scottish Government's Learning for Sustainability 2030 Action Plan.

