

# Increasing Children and Young People's Access to Hobbies and Leisure Activities

## 2023 Churchill Fellow

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**Amy Woodhouse**

*"I would like a festival for children and young people, with culture that appeals to them! There should be a graffiti workshop, DJ course, professional skateboarders teaching kids tricks, streetball, influencers who can inspire young people to realise their dreams, a place where artists show people how they can design their sneakers, an underground concert with something else than Antti Tuisku, etc. I have more ideas."*

**Young Person in Porvoo, Finland**

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## Summary

### Introduction

In September and October 2023 I was fortunate to be able to visit Finland and Iceland on a Churchill Fellowship to explore how these countries have worked to increase children and young people's access to hobbies. I travelled for six weeks in total, spending three weeks in each country – meeting people, asking questions, exploring different approaches.

The purpose of this report is to collate all my findings from my travels into one place so it can be used to help advocate for change in Scotland and increase free access to hobbies for children and young people living here. Lots of hobby provision exists in Scotland, but there is no overarching model at a national level, and financial and access barriers can prevent children and young people from participating.

The definition of a hobby that I am using in this report is 'a prolonged group activity for school aged children, undertaken outside of home environments, run by a trained adult instructor'. This is based on parameters established within the Finnish and Icelandic models.

### The Finnish Model



The Finnish Model has been operating since 2021. The main goal of the Finnish Model is to improve the wellbeing of children and young people in the Basic Education stage (roughly 7–17 years old) through increasing access to free leisure activities, provided in school, after school.

There are hobby co-ordinators in 267 of the 309 municipalities in Finland. Co-ordinators research the hobby preferences of children and young people in their area, identify local hobby providers who can deliver the activities children want to take part in and co-ordinate programmes of activities with participating schools. Children and young people are then free to sign up to hobbies they want to take part in. A National Lead provides support and guidance for local co-ordinators.

### The Icelandic Model



The Icelandic Model has existed since the 1990s, when it was introduced to address high levels of alcohol, tobacco and drug use among teenagers. It incorporates support for access to hobbies alongside other activities including work with parents and schools.

All school aged children and young people (aged approximately 6–18 years) are given support to access leisure activities of their choice. This is arranged through the distribution of a Leisure Card, which parents or carers can use to pay for hobbies provided by local organisations. The amount available on the Leisure Card varies from municipality to municipality.

## Findings

The following key findings emerged from the data:

- Both countries had national impetus for developing their model – in Iceland it was in response to high levels of teenage drinking and smoking, while in Finland it was driven by a concern about children and young people’s wellbeing and a conviction that hobbies had become too elite and exclusive.
- The participation of children and young people at all levels is important when rolling out a national hobby model – from involvement in large-scale national data collection to local day-to-day participation in activities.
- Dedicated funding is important for removing the financial barriers to hobbies and it can also act as a force for culture change in the way hobbies are provided.
- Both countries have an agreed national approach that outlines a set of overarching principles or features that provides a framework in which local municipality based activity operates.
- In both countries, hobby provision relies heavily on pre-existing sports, arts and other organisations to deliver activities, either in schools or other community based settings. Both countries believe in the important role hobby providers and instructors play in supporting children and young people to get the most out of their hobby experiences.
- In both Iceland and Finland many hobbies take place directly after school before children go home for the evening. This fits well into many families’ lives and leaves evenings free for families to spend time together, or for other activities.
- Schools are the location for most hobbies funded through the Finnish Model, whereas in Iceland hobbies take place in a wide variety of settings. Both approaches have their strengths and challenges.
- Both Finland and Iceland have endeavoured to deliver universal hobby models and believe that a universal approach brings multiple benefits. However, there are some groups of children and young people who are less likely to take up hobbies or experience particular barriers to access, including older teenagers, children with additional support needs, children from families that are new to the country and children living in very rural communities.
- Gathering and using data is an important element of both the Finnish and Icelandic models and one that should be a factor of any consideration of a Scottish Model.



Image of children's art work in Finland

## Conclusions and recommendations

The Finnish and Icelandic models provide us with confidence that increasing access to hobbies for children and young people is possible. They tell us what building blocks are necessary to make a nationwide system work, including participation, money, co-ordination, settings, providers, accessibility and evidence. The report makes the following recommendations:

1. Scotland should hold a national conversation about hobbies and explore their role and value for children and young people across the country. This should involve children and young people, parents and carers, hobby providers, schools and decision makers at local authority and national levels.
2. Any Scottish hobby model should build in participation from children and young people from the start and involve children and young people at all levels. This should be framed with a child rights lens.
3. The Scottish Government should map the nature and extent of current funding for hobbies in Scotland and scope out options for more effective coalescence of that funding under one national hobby model.
4. The Scottish Government should consider how a Scottish hobby model might operate at a national and local level, building on learning from approaches developed in Finland and Iceland.
5. The Scottish Government must consider what constitutes suitable settings for hobbies in Scotland, considering the merits of Finland's and Iceland's approaches and how they fit with Scotland's infrastructure and length of the school day. Scotland should explore to what extent, and how, the 'Common Core of Skills, Knowledge & Understanding and Values for the "Children's Workforce"' is embedded within existing hobby providers' practice in Scotland.
6. Any Scottish hobby model should consider the needs of specific groups of children and young people, including those with protected characteristics or living in rural and remote communities.
7. Scotland should build in a sound approach to monitoring and evaluation from the start of any new hobby model. This should encompass impact and process evaluation data and incorporate the views and experiences of children and young people throughout.



## 1. Introduction

This report is about hobbies. About why they are important, particularly for children and young people. About what prevents children from taking part in hobbies and how we can improve access. About learning from other countries to improve our own.

Hobbies are brilliant things for many reasons. Hobbies give us the chance to learn new skills, build confidence and self-esteem and to make friends. If we're lucky, we may find interests and passions that stay with us our whole lives.

However, not all children and young people take part in hobbies, with cost and availability acting as real barriers for many. It would be good if we could change this.

In 2018/19 I was lucky enough to take part in a cross-Europe peer learning exchange on youth mental health. It was organised and hosted by the Finnish and Dutch governmental ministries. It was during one of the meetings in Helsinki that I first heard of the Finnish Government's plans to bring in a 'hobby guarantee', as it was called then, to give all children and young people access to a hobby. The idea struck me as a brilliant one from the start. As a mental health researcher who had made the shift to policy and influencing for children and families, I could see that this idea made sense. I've been speaking about it (and probably boring people with it) ever since.

It was only much later on that I found out that the Finnish approach had built on the Icelandic prevention model. I suspect most people find out about the two countries' models in the other order. Nevertheless, it became apparent to me that Scotland could learn much from these two countries' approaches and I started on my personal quest to find out more.

In September and October 2023, I was fortunate to be able to visit Finland and Iceland on a Churchill Fellowship. I travelled for six weeks in total, spending three weeks in each country – meeting people, asking questions, exploring different approaches. I blogged throughout my trip and if you are interested, you can read more here. I'm incredibly grateful to the Churchill Fellowship for funding and supporting this trip. Deep thanks also to everyone who met with me, gave me their time and told me about their experiences.

My job in this report is to collate all my findings from my travels into one place so it can be used to help advocate for change in Scotland and increase free access to hobbies for children and young people living here. I know many people in Scotland feel as I do – that hobbies deserve to be a key part of all children's lives but that we need to raise the esteem in which they are held in Scotland. Somehow we need to make them more of a priority and better embed them within the systems and structures we put in place for children and young people. I hope this report will help move us in that direction.

It's going to be interesting, thought provoking and I hope inspiring. Are you ready to jump in?

## 1.1 What is a hobby?

Do you like the word ‘hobby’? Feel confident about what it does and doesn’t mean? Not everyone does.

A dictionary definition of a hobby is as follows:

***‘An activity pursued in spare time for pleasure or relaxation’<sup>1</sup>***

The definition is clear about the purpose of a hobby – it is for pleasure, not education or work related – but otherwise it is quite open and non-specific. It doesn’t describe what activities might or might not constitute a hobby and that is probably right given how personal our hobbies are to us.

However, when you are thinking about increasing children and young people’s access to hobbies at a national scale, it can be helpful to have a few parameters. Finland and Iceland have both focused on group activities for their hobby initiatives. These are activities done outside of the home with others. Part of this focus is no doubt based on practical and financial considerations, but both countries also recognise the value of the social aspect of hobbies, and see them as a good way for children to extend and strengthen their friendship groups. They also recognise the value a good, skilled activities leader or instructor can bring – for their ability to foster positive, supportive cultures that encourage children and young people’s participation, inclusion and wellbeing.



Image of spools of thread from a craft room in Iceland

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/hobby>



Both countries also focus on hobbies undertaken over a consistent period of time. These are not by and large one-off events, but activities that happen regularly over weeks, months and years. This, they feel, is how impact is maximised.

A final parameter that's worth highlighting at this stage is age. In both Finland and Iceland their hobby initiatives are aimed at school-aged children. Both countries have a later school starting age than Scotland, so in essence this means children aged 6 or 7 years up to around 18 years.

It will be this definition of a hobby, as a prolonged group activity for school aged children, undertaken outside of home environments, run by a trained adult instructor, that I will be using in this report. I could use the term 'leisure activity' or 'out of school activity' instead but I personally feel these terms are a bit cold and formal. For me they don't capture the joy at the heart of hobbies – these are things we choose to spend our time on because they speak to us as individuals and we love them. So I'm sticking with the word 'hobby' for this report and I hope that's OK with you.

## 1.2 Children's hobbies in Scotland

There are many, many opportunities for children and young people to take part in hobbies across Scotland. Think of the clubs, organisations and societies you know of – all those with uniforms (for example, Brownies, Guides, Cubs, Scouts etc), the dance organisations teaching 5-year-olds ballet, drama societies, clubs for tennis, football or chess, swimming, gymnastics or coding. I could go on. Many of these will be run by private organisations, or by volunteers. Most will have some cost attached.

There may also be clubs run for free by schools, either at lunchtimes or after school, often led by teachers with a particular skill or interest, or maybe those at the top end of secondary schools. At my own son's school there is a DJ skills club run by a teacher on a Tuesday lunchtime and a music technology club run by S4 pupils on Wednesday lunchtimes, for example. Both operate on a drop-in basis.

Active Schools is a national initiative funded by **sportscotland** to develop and deliver quality sporting opportunities for children and young people across Scotland. There is a network of co-ordinators across the country building opportunities for children and young people to take part. Then there are other national initiatives such as the Scottish Government's **Summer Programme**, which has funded local authorities to provide activities, food and childcare over the school holidays. In 2023 this was worth £4 million. You might also think about the Scottish Football Association's **Extra Time Programme**, or Creative Scotland's **Access All Arts** fund, both designed to remove barriers to hobby participation.

There is no shortage of initiatives, in other words, but a complicated picture with no overarching strategy or national co-ordination.

### Hobby participation levels in Scotland

So how many children and young people currently take part in hobbies across Scotland? The truth is we don't have an accurate, up-to-date understanding of this.

Last year, when I was still working for Children in Scotland, we commissioned IPSOS to undertake **research** with 1,533 secondary school aged children across Scotland.

Participants were asked whether they currently took part in a club or activity after school or at the weekend. The research found that only 54% of young people of secondary school age said that they took part in a club or activity outside of school. This dropped to 45% among secondary school aged children living in the areas of highest deprivation, compared with 65% in the most affluent areas. Those living with a physical or mental health condition were also less likely to take part in clubs or activities out of school.

Research from **Aspire Money in 2017** indicated that the average parent in Scotland spends £32 a month on their child's main hobby. Parents also spend an average of 15 hours per month transporting children to hobbies, washing kit, attending matches or performances etc. It's a significant commitment that not all families can accommodate. For example, **Citizens Advice Scotland (CAS)** found that in 2023 over 235,000 parents/carers were forced to cut back on hobbies for their children in the past 12 months as a result of the cost of living crisis.

What this means in a nutshell is fairly obvious but important. Not all children and young people living in Scotland are regularly taking part in a hobby, and poverty is likely to be a contributing factor to this.

We've just seen the amended UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (Incorporation) (Scotland) Bill receive Royal Assent, meaning that all children and young people in Scotland now have their rights enshrined in law. This includes Article 31, the right to leisure and play. Given that poverty prevents some children from participating in hobbies, maybe we should start framing this as a rights issue and start talking about children's right to a hobby.



Image of school bags from a school in Finland



## 2. Methods

The Churchill Fellowship supports UK citizens to travel to other countries to explore particular areas of their policy or practice and bring the learning back to the UK to influence change. My six-week research study visit took place from 9th September to 21st October 2023, with three weeks spent in Finland and three weeks in Iceland. The aim of the study visit was to explore those countries' approaches to increasing access to hobbies for children and young people.

My main research question was:

*'What can Finland and Iceland tell Scotland about how to implement a national approach to increasing children and young people's access to hobbies?'*

The aims of my Fellowship were as follows:

- To gather in-depth learning from two countries (Finland and Iceland) that have national approaches to increasing children's access to hobbies, including evidence about impact, benefits, challenges and opportunities.
- To share this learning with relevant stakeholders in Scotland and beyond.
- To use this learning to encourage the Scottish Government to introduce a hobby model for all school-aged children and young people in Scotland.

### 2.1 Case study approach

I used a case study approach, selecting two countries to act as my cases. Finland and Iceland were chosen as they both had developed national approaches to increasing children and young people's access to hobbies. They are also both countries from where Scotland has previously adopted policy and practice developments, such as Finland's **Baby Box** scheme and Iceland's **Barnahus Model**. Both countries include rural and urban communities and Finland has a similar population size to Scotland as well.

I could therefore be confident that national approaches in these countries could potentially be transferable to a Scottish context.

With three weeks in each country, my aim was to gain an understanding of the national policy context in each country and how this policy worked in practice. I looked to gain examples from different communities and from different perspectives. In particular, I was interested in finding out:

- The aims of the national model in each country, how it was funded and structured.
- How the model operated in different locations and settings.
- How it supported the engagement of children and young people of different ages and with a range of protected characteristics.
- What, if any, challenges had been experienced implementing the model and how these had been overcome.
- What the impact of the models had been in each country.

## 2.2 Link person

In both countries I identified a key link person who had a good overview of their country's model. In each case these individuals were academics. I established contact with my key links prior to departure and they made suggestions about where I should stay in the country and they put me in touch with other relevant people it would be helpful to meet with.

I met with both individuals twice during my stay in each country. Once at the start of my visit to gain their perspective on their national model, and again at the end of my visit to share my findings and sense check my conclusions with them. Both meetings were incredibly helpful and provided me with some reassurance that I had gained a relevant understanding of the model in their countries.

## 2.3 Locations

I spent more than half of my time in the capital cities of Helsinki and Reykjavik. This enabled me to both meet with officials and experts who could help me understand the national approach, as well as understand how the model worked in a city context.

Helsinki has a population of 673,000, with the Greater Helsinki area having a population of 1.5 million. This is not incomparable with Glasgow (630,000 population) and Greater Glasgow (1,023,000 population).

Reykjavik is much smaller, with a population of 140,000 and the Greater Reykjavik area having a population of 248,000. This is more comparable in size with Scottish cities like Aberdeen (197,000) and Dundee (150,000).



image of a toy house from a library in Iceland

During my visits I also travelled beyond the capital cities in both countries to gain an understanding of how the model worked in different municipalities. In Finland I spent multiple days in Tampere (341,000 population) and Lempäälä (25,000 population). I was hosted by local hobby co-ordinators in both areas and taken to visit a variety of schools and hobby providers. I also made small more focused visits to organisations and services in Porvoo (50,000 population) and Vantaa (246,000 population). In Iceland the majority of my time was spent in Reykjavik, but I also made visits to organisations in Kópavogur (38,000 population) and Sveltjarnarnes (4,800 population).

## 2.4 Participants

Cumulatively I met with 42 professionals over the course of my six-week visit to Finland and Iceland, including national representatives, hobby co-ordinators, hobby providers, headteachers and youth workers. I was able to observe approximately 90 children take part in hobbies and leisure activities, most of whom were in school settings in Finland.



Image of art materials from a school in Finland

**Table 1: Participants in this study**

Participants	Finland	Iceland	Total	% of all professional participants
National representatives	3	6	9	21.4%
Hobby co-ordinators / municipality leads	8	5	13	31.0%
Hobby providers	10	6	16	38.1%
Headteachers	2	0	2	4.8%
Youth workers	1	1	2	4.8%
<b>ALL PROFESSIONALS</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>42</b>	100%
Children and young people (approximates)	70	20	90	
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>94</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>132</b>	

## 2.5 Settings

Many of the meetings, particularly with national representatives, took place in offices. However, I was also able to go into a variety of settings where hobbies took place, meet with hobby providers and often observe children and young people take part in hobbies while I was there.

**Table 2: Hobby settings visited**

Hobby settings visited	Finland	Iceland	Total	% of all settings
Sports centres	2	2	4	25%
Youth centres	1	1	2	12.5%
Arts centres	1	1	2	12.5%
Libraries	1	1	2	12.5%
Schools	5	0	5	31.25%
Community centres	0	1	1	6.25%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>100%</b>

At these settings I was able to observe the following types of hobbies:

Architecture club, chess, ceramics, circus skills, dog club, dance, football, gaming, horse riding, music making, parkour, sewing, visual arts.

## 2.6 Data collection

My main data collection methods with professionals were unstructured interviews and group discussions, based on the key themes identified above in Section 2.1. Most of the professionals I met with were able to speak English but a couple of hobby providers I met with did not speak English. In those instances, other professionals I was with translated for me. I took detailed written notes of all conversations and typed them up afterwards.

With children and young people my main data collection method was observation, either passively from the sidelines or actively as a participant, when I joined in with some of the hobby activities alongside the children. As well as observing how the children were taking part in the hobbies, I was also able to observe instructors delivering hobbies. Almost none of this was delivered in English, but other professionals I was with would translate or provide information about what was going on. For example, they would tell me how instructors were encouraging the participation and involvement of children and young people in decision making. Again, I wrote detailed notes of these observations and typed them up afterwards.



**Image of craft materials from an art centre in Iceland**

## 2.7 Analysis

I undertook a thematic analysis using all my typed up notes to identify recurring themes in the data relating to the development and delivery of each country's model. At the end of my time in each country I presented these themes to my key link person for peer review. In both cases they were able to add further reflections to my findings.

On my return to the UK, I brought the findings from both countries together to identify common themes across the two nations' approaches. These common themes have formed the basis of my findings section of this report.

## 2.8 Gaps and limitations

Although I was interested in how the two models worked in very rural communities, I had to balance that interest with the practicalities of how to make best use of my limited time. In the end I spent most of my time in larger population centres in both countries, which allowed me to meet with more individuals. I was, however, able to ask some national figures about how the model worked in smaller rural communities, so was able to generate some insight that way.

I was also interested in how the models met the needs of different groups of children and young people. For example, I was able to observe one group in Lempäälä that was specifically for children with additional support needs and an arts group in Tampere for young people for whom school had not worked so well. I was also able to speak with people who ran arts workshops for LGBTQI+ young people, delivered hobbies for children of African descent and supported hobby uptake among families new to Iceland, including refugees and asylum seekers. However, there were still some gaps, particularly in terms of younger children aged under 7 years, as neither country's model included this age group.



## 3. About this report

In this report I will present a brief overview of each country's model. Then we go into a section where I take on some key themes that arose through my conversations and exploration which I feel are important considerations. Throughout each section I highlight examples of hobbies, venues, organisations or approaches relevant to the theme. At the end of the report I draw some conclusions and recommendations for Scotland.



## 4. The Finnish approach in a nutshell

I've been told that the origins of the Finnish hobby approach can be traced back to the post Second World War era when concepts of civic education (non-formalised school education) really started to take hold. However, for the purposes of this report I am going to start in 2019 when the 'Hobby Guarantee' made it into the Finnish Programme for Government. It was felt by many at this time that sports and cultural activities had become too elite and competitive and had moved away from the original goals of civic education. The commitment to a hobby guarantee aimed to increase children and young people's access to hobbies, improve their wellbeing and rebalance the country's relationship with leisure activities.

Following a piloting phase, a nationwide Finnish Model for Leisure Activities has been in place since 2021. When I visited, the Model had just entered its third year of operation and was running in 267 of 309 municipalities (covering 91% of mainland Finland) and in 1,900 (89%) of schools. It had approximately 140,000 children and young people taking part. Earlier in 2023 the Finnish Parliament passed an amendment to the Youth Law 2017 which placed the Finnish Model into statute, thereby protecting it for the future.

### Aims

The main goal of the Finnish Model is to improve the wellbeing of children and young people by increasing access to free leisure activities after school. This can include sports, arts or other types of hobbies such as cooking, coding or animal based hobbies.

### Participants

The programme is aimed at children and young people in the Basic Education phase (roughly aged 7 to 16 years). Participation should be free, voluntary and accessible to all children and young people, including those with additional support needs.

In order to know which hobbies children and young people want to take part in, the Ministry of Education and Culture runs a biennial nationwide pupil survey, where participants can choose from a list of 81 different options. Through this and other forms of participation it is hoped that the programme is tailored to the actual and not assumed preferences of children and young people.



Image of young people's art work in Finland



## **Settings**

A key feature of the Finnish Model is that hobbies should be delivered in school, after school.

## **Co-ordination**

Municipalities apply for central funding to co-ordinate local hobby activity. They must also make a 25% funding contribution themselves. Municipality based hobby co-ordinators will research the hobby preferences of children and young people in the area, identify local hobby providers who can deliver the activities children want to take part in and co-ordinate programmes of activities with participating schools. Children and young people are then free to sign up to hobbies they want to take part in. A National Lead provides support and guidance for local co-ordinators.

## **Funding**

The Finnish Government has committed €14.5 million per year to deliver the model.

Read more here: [harrastamisensuomenmalli.fi/en](http://harrastamisensuomenmalli.fi/en)



## **5. The Icelandic approach in a nutshell**

Back in the 1990s many people were worried about the levels of smoking, drinking and substance misuse present among young people in Iceland. Nationally almost 23% of 15-16 year olds were smoking every day and 42% had got drunk within the last month. It was agreed that action was needed on a country-wide scale – that this was a national problem, rather than an individual one. Something had gone wrong with the environment Iceland had created for its young people.

And so began a new nationwide response that had a number of different strands. It encouraged parents to be more actively involved in their children's lives, made changes to legislation and invested in increased access to hobbies and leisure activities for children and young people. The idea was to deter young people from these health-harming behaviours through providing them with healthier and safer alternatives. There was also an emphasis on data collection from the start to measure and record the impact of this approach.

Fast forward a few years and the data looked amazing! By 2016 everyday smoking had decreased to 3% and only 5% had been drunk in the last month. International interest grew and it was around this point that the country's collective action started to become known as the 'Icelandic Prevention Model'. I've been told this is a term only really known outside of Iceland – if you ask people locally they will be mystified by it. The various components of the Icelandic model are just business as usual to the country now.

## **Aims**

The purpose of the Icelandic model is to reduce health-harming behaviours in young people and increase access to hobbies for all children and young people, regardless of social or economic circumstances.

### **Participants**

All school-aged children and young people (aged approximately 6 to 18) are given support to access leisure activities of their choice. This is arranged through the distribution of a Leisure Card, which parents or carers can use to pay for hobbies provided by local organisations.

### **Settings**

Organisations providing leisure activities can apply to become registered so that Leisure Card credits can be used to pay for their classes and activities. Hobbies are delivered in a variety of venues, depending on the type of activity. This may include sports clubs, art centres, schools and community centres.

### **Co-ordination**

Co-ordination is undertaken through municipalities – all but one of Iceland's 64 municipalities take part in the Leisure Card scheme. In order for a group to be registered, its venue needs to meet certain health and safety criteria, the staff need to have certain levels of qualifications and the organisation must provide sessions over at least 8 weeks in length.

### **Funding**

The amount available on the Leisure Card varies from municipality to municipality. In Reykjavik it is worth approximately kr 75,000 (£445) a year per child – with around 15,550 school-aged children and young people in Reykjavik that's about £7 million per year.

Read more here: [planetyouth.org/the-method/publications](https://planetyouth.org/the-method/publications)

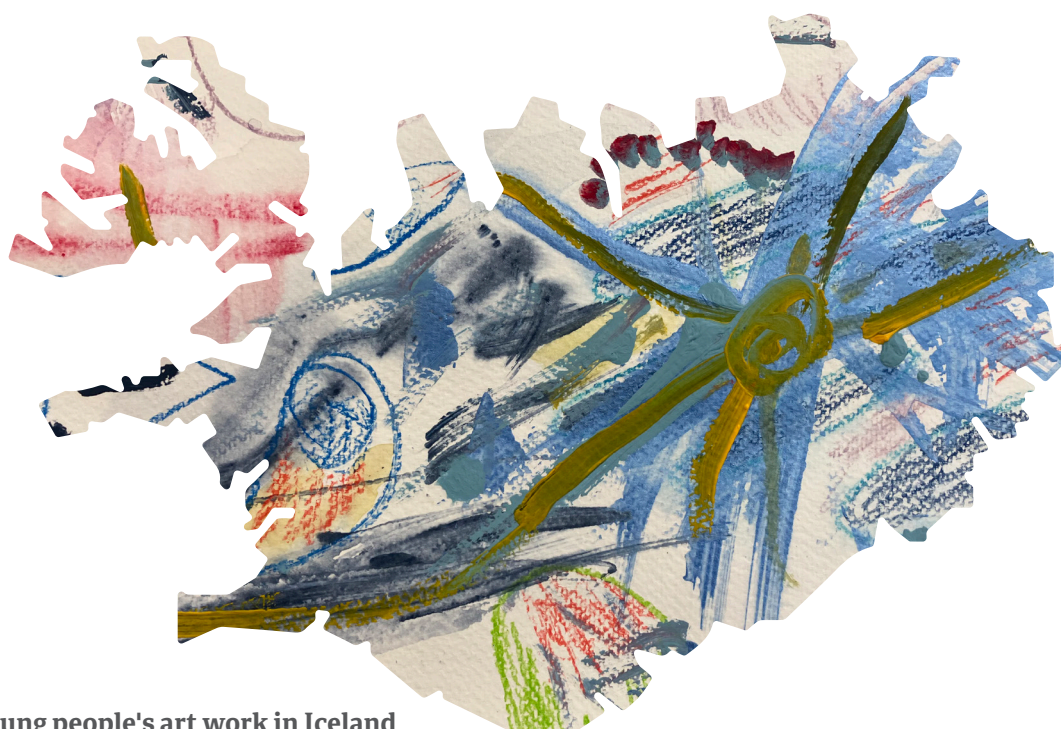


Image of young people's art work in Iceland



## 6. Findings

In this section I will bring together findings from Finland and Iceland to explore key themes that emerged from my travels and identify learning relevant to the Scottish context. I'll bring in some case studies that illustrate how the two countries' models work in practice and ask some questions that are worth considering if we want to increase access for children and young people to hobbies in this country.

### 6.1 Theme One: Cultural momentum

The first thing I've reflected on is the vital importance for both Finland and Iceland of culture and timing. Finland was ready for this model, I was told. The model builds on societal changes taking place from the post-war years onwards. The country had moved away from a traditional view of hobbies as being valuable in and of themselves to an environment in the early 2000s where competitive and elite sports became dominant. Children who did not fit into the elite competitive world of sports were missing out. At the same time there was an increased focus on children's wellbeing and an interest in what could be done to promote and improve wellbeing for all children.



Image of children's art work in Finland

In Iceland, they were responding to a nationwide concern about levels of health-harming behaviours among young people. Hobbies were seen as an important part of a wider societal solution to this problem. Over time, Iceland has built up an impressive bank of evidence to show that their multifaceted approach has worked. Decades on, access to hobbies is still subsidised through the provision of the Leisure Card.

Every country has its layers of social archaeology just underneath the surface that inform and influence what comes next. In Scotland, we are 15 years on from the national rollout of **Getting It Right For Every Child** (GIRFEC) and 12 years on from the report of the **Christie Commission** and its recommendation for a shift towards preventative spend. In January 2024 the United Nations Rights of the Child (Incorporation) (Scotland) Bill received Royal Assent which now enshrines in law, amongst other things, children's right to a cultural life.

Nationally there have been concerns about the mental health and wellbeing of Scotland's children and young people for many years. Most recently there's been a focus on how poor mental health affects behaviour in schools. Few I think would disagree with the proposal that Scotland needs practical solutions to support children's wellbeing.

I was left with the sense of a strong cultural belief in both Finland and Iceland that hobbies are a vitally important part of children and young people's lives. I don't think people in Scotland would disagree with this idea in principle but I am sceptical about whether most folk would put hobbies high on the policy priority list or view them as part of the solution to a mental health crisis. It's just not something I hear talked about with any urgency.

And given the wide ranging benefits hobbies can have, I wonder why this is? What will it take to really increase interest in hobbies as a positive solution to some of the difficulties children across Scotland are experiencing? Does it feel like the time is right for the rise of a hobby model in Scotland?

**Recommendation One:** Scotland should hold a national conversation about hobbies and explore their role and value for children and young people across the country. This should involve children and young people, parents and carers, hobby providers, schools and decision makers at local authority and national levels.

## 6.2 Theme Two: Participation

If now is a good time to build a cultural momentum behind increasing access to hobbies in Scotland, then an excellent theme to start exploring what this might look like in practice is participation, and particularly the participation of children and young people. I'll highlight two examples from my travels that might help give some ideas about how participation could be threaded through a Scottish approach - the Finnish National Pupil Survey and Samfés in Iceland.

### **Finland: National Pupil Survey 2022**

One of the first actions Finland took when developing its model was to introduce a national survey of children and young people to find out what hobbies they were interested in participating in. There is now a commitment to undertake a national pupil survey every two years. It is recognised that, as adults, we might not be in touch with children's current interests, or may be in danger of projecting our own preferences onto them.

The **most recent survey** took place in 2022 and was distributed through all 2,229 primary and secondary schools in the country. It received a whopping 164,000 responses. That's about 30% of all children in that age range. The survey found that 85% of students took part in an enjoyable leisure activity. Of the 15% of students who did not have a leisure activity, 58% would like to start.

Students were allowed to pick their favourite hobbies from a list of 81 choices. This list was generated by children and young people themselves, taking their answers from previous surveys, but it can still be added to if something is missing. I have heard that when this survey was first introduced some people were concerned that the hobby ideas received from children and young people would be fanciful, unrealistic or unaffordable. What if they all want to drive a Formula 1 car, for example?

However, in the end the top choice overall was parkour and everyone breathed a sigh of relief. And it wasn't just the first choice that was modest, practical and affordable, other popular choices were too – cooking, animal hobbies, coding, climbing, moped repair. The traditionally popular hobbies in Finland of football and ice hockey were there too, but lower down the priority list. No Formula 1 car driving – surprise, surprise.

After the survey takes place, it then becomes the responsibility of hobby co-ordinators to look at the local data and make the children's preferences a reality. I have been told by everyone I meet that participation is a fundamental part of the Finnish Model. In addition to the national survey, children and young people are expected to be involved locally during the planning phase and at evaluation points twice a year. Participation should also be threaded throughout the delivery on hobby activities, and through my travels I witnessed the quiet, consistent ways in which the participation of children and young people was supported. It's youth work really, in the guise of street dance, craft work or horse riding.



Image of children's art work in Finland

The national survey is not perfect. It is long and not all schools take part. It is in truth probably most helpful in providing a national picture of hobby preferences and engagement rather than local evidence for planning purposes. However, it has provided a real point of clarity for me. In the introduction to this report I wondered about whether we should define what activities constitute a hobby. Now I have it verbatim from Finland. A hobby is whatever children consider it to be. It's a liberating and illuminating way of looking at things.

The 2022 survey data (in Finnish) is available [here](#).

## **Iceland: Samfés**

In Iceland I had the privilege of visiting **Samfés**, the national organisation for youth work, and one of their 125 youth centre members, 100og1. There's no real equivalent of Samfés in Scotland – in essence they are one part **Young Scot**, one part **YouthLink Scotland**, one part **Scottish Youth Parliament**. That is a lot of ground to cover for only two members of staff.

Every year Samfés delivers the National Youth Congress for young people. It's an important opportunity for young people to have a say in how youth centres and Samfés are run. In 2023 the congress was held in Akureyri in north Iceland. Each youth centre can bring five young people to the congress, providing there are staff who can attend as well. This year there were a whopping 350 young people there and 100 staff. 100og1 was one of the groups present.

Participants take part in a series of workshops over the weekend. They also elect members of Samfés youth council, which is made up of around 27 members from across Iceland's nine regions. Local young people vote for candidates from their own area. The other exciting event I heard about was **SamFestingurinn**, the annual youth festival in Reykjavik. With around 4,500 young people aged 13–16 attending each year, the scale of it is phenomenal. Friday night is dedicated to bands and DJs. Saturday is a singing competition, broadcast on national TV. If you want to get a sense of the scale of the thing, take a look at the **YouTube** video from 2023.

Young people have to be regular attendees at their local youth club to get a place at SamFestingurinn and, as with the national congress, it's local youth centres that bring and are responsible for their young people. I'm particularly interested in this festival because for the last couple of years I've been involved in **work** with Children in Scotland, Scottish Ensemble and the University of Stirling looking at how live music experiences can be opened up to children and young people. One of the suggestions repeatedly mentioned by young participants involved has been a dedicated young person's festival. As adults we've thought that sounded fantastic and very ambitious. It is both. And in Iceland it already exists!

My take home message from both Finland's national pupil survey and Samfés is the importance of participation across the whole country and at different levels. From large-scale national data collection, sittings and festivals, to local day-to-day participation in activities.

If we move forward with a national hobby model in Scotland we need to make sure participation is built in from the very start. When I visited Porvoo in Finland, the town was in the midst of a participatory budgeting exercise to agree where to invest a pot of money. It would be a measure of commitment if a Scottish hobby model could incorporate participatory budgeting within its scope.

The positive story here is that we have lots of excellent practice already to build on. We have a Scottish Youth Parliament with elected members in every constituency and a raft of excellent participatory practice taking place both nationally and locally, delivered by skilled practitioners. Incorporation of the UNCRC into Scots Law can only make our national commitment to meaningful participation of children and young people stronger. We have all the building blocks we need to make participation a core part of a Scottish hobby model.

**Recommendation Two:** any Scottish hobby model should build in children and young people’s participation from the start and involve children and young people at all levels. This should be framed with a child rights lens.

### 6.3 Theme Three: Money

It’s maybe at about this point where you start saying, ‘this is all very well and good but how do we pay for it all?’

#### ***Finnish funding***

In Finland the bulk of the funding comes from the Finnish Ministry for Education and Culture. Last year they invested €14.5 million in the model. They have received some financial support from the EU to help with this. Planning and delivery of hobbies is the responsibility of Finland’s municipalities and the money is distributed by the ministry to municipalities to enable them to undertake these functions.

There are 309 municipalities in Finland and each is invited to submit an application for funding to support their rollout of the model. In their applications they have to outline their approach to planning, delivery and evaluation, including how the views of children and young people will be included and accessibility emphasised. It is also important to note that there is an expectation of a 25% self-financed share from the municipalities themselves.

In 2022, 267 applications were successfully funded. If you are interested in how much each municipality received you can see the figures [here](#). It’s worth highlighting that most municipalities are very small in size, with less than 6,000 residents, and some have fewer than 100 residents. Compare that with Helsinki, which has over 650,000 residents and you can see why the funding amounts vary so much.

It’s clearly a lot of money being invested by the Finnish Government, but taken as a whole, it doesn’t feel to me like an outrageous sum. It’s about the same amount as the Scottish Government invests in the **Communities Mental Health and Wellbeing Fund for Adults**, for example, and is much lower than the investment in the **Attainment Challenge**. And just for the avoidance of doubt, the population sizes of both countries are pretty much identical at around 5.5 million inhabitants.

I’ve been told that one thing that helps is that the administration burden is light. There is only one member of staff at a national level, for example. In an ideal world, however, I suspect the national lead would welcome a bit of additional staffing power.

#### ***Icelandic funding***

In Iceland, funding for the Leisure Card comes from municipalities and each sets its own level per individual child. All but one of the 64 municipalities provide an individual leisure entitlement. The 64th has instead removed the cost from all local leisure opportunities.

Reykjavik has the highest entitlement at kr 75,000 per child per year (around £429), with an overall cost to the city of around £7 million. Akureyri and Árborg provides kr 45,000 per year (£257), Kópavogur kr 54,000 (£309) and Akranes kr 35,000 (£200). The amount provided will depend in part on what is on offer in each locality, bearing in mind options might be quite limited in rural communities.

Participation in hobbies and leisure activities in Iceland is expensive. The amount provided through the leisure card may not cover the full cost of participation in one hobby, depending on what the child chooses to do. Arts based hobbies tend to be more expensive than sports club opportunities, for example. However, the Leisure Card entitlement does help make hobbies affordable and accessible and the entitlement is available to all school-aged children on a universal basis.

### ***Funding landscape for hobbies***

Scotland shares some of the same funding challenges as Iceland and Finland, with similar experiences of a cost of living crisis.

At the moment the Finnish Model is funded on a year-by-year basis, which feels all too depressingly familiar. With a relatively new government in place, people I spoke to in Finland were convinced that embedding the hobby model in Finnish law has been a vital step to securing its future.

It is also worth pointing out that in both Finland and Iceland, the hobby or leisure card model is not the only source of funding for children and young people's access to hobbies. There has been other funding to support children's access to sports or the arts for years, some of which has gone via large national sports or arts organisations. People in both countries have described the current range of funding sources as complex; however, the ambition in Finland is that, over time, more funding streams will become aligned under the Finnish Model.

There is no doubt that the principles that underpin both the Finnish and Icelandic models have allowed for bit of a power shift to happen. In Finland municipalities are commissioning on behalf of children, who are in essence the customers. It's encouraging hobby providers to think more deeply about participation and inclusive approaches – which can be new and potentially threatening to established national organisations who have their own ways of doing things.

A similar shift took place some time ago in Iceland. All local sports club buildings in Iceland are owned by the municipalities but run by not-for-profit organisations. The sports clubs are a focus point for their communities and have a responsibility to ensure that the whole community is able to attend.

So it's not just about the amounts of money, but how it's used and the expectations that go along with it that is key – a focus on wellbeing, participation and accessibility.

We talk a lot of the need for joined-up coherent funding in Scotland too. I wonder what the map of Scottish hobby funding currently looks like and what the total value of it is when combined. I suspect it is more than we think.

**Recommendation Three:** the Scottish Government should map the nature and extent of current funding for hobbies in Scotland and scope out options for more effective coalescence of that funding under one national hobby model.

## **6.4 Theme Four: Co-ordination**

### ***National co-ordination***

Co-ordination approaches varied between Finland and Iceland and also within each country between municipalities. However, in both countries there is an agreed



national approach which outlines a set of overarching principles or features, and that provides a framework in which local municipality based activity operates.



**Image of graffiti in Finland**

Co-ordination approaches varied between Finland and Iceland and also within each country between municipalities. However, in both countries there is an agreed national approach which outlines a set of overarching principles or features, and that provides a framework in which local municipality based activity operates.

In Finland, this means approaches that:

- aim to improve children's wellbeing
- are based in school, after school
- are free for children to access
- are delivered on youth work principles of participation and inclusion.

In Iceland, the model is based on the following principles:

- A society-wide approach is needed.
- The approach should enhance connections between children and their families, peers, schools, communities and adults.
- Planning and decision making should be based on local data.
- Long-term investment is required.

As mentioned earlier, the Icelandic Prevention Model aims to reduce health-harming behaviour and is wider in scope than supporting access to hobbies and leisure activities alone, incorporating work with parents/carers and schools. Nevertheless, these principles as outlined should be a feature of the leisure activities component as much as any other element.

### **Local co-ordination**

In both Finland and Iceland, local co-ordination is undertaken at a municipality level. In Scotland, local authorities would be the nearest equivalent of devolved power, but in truth there are far more municipalities in both countries, serving much smaller communities than most local authorities in Scotland.

In Finland each participating municipality employs a hobby co-ordinator who arranges which free hobbies are provided in which schools and commissions organisations to deliver these. Building relationships with schools and hobby providers is therefore a key component of the role.

In Iceland the co-ordination role focuses on ensuring that organisations are signed up to the Leisure Card scheme and local parents know how to use the Leisure Card entitlement to pay for activities for their children.

In both countries hobby provision relies heavily on pre-existing sports, arts and other organisations to deliver activities, either in schools or other community based settings. And both countries place certain conditions around this, with safety and quality in mind. Both countries also have a role for co-ordinators around gathering local participation data and using this for evaluation and planning purposes.

### **Case Study: Reykjavik Leisure Card**

In Reykjavik, the Leisure Card scheme has existed since 2007 and the annual entitlement per child (aged 6 to 18 years) is kr 75,000 (about £444). The entitlement follows the child but is managed by the parents/carers who use an **online system** to access their credits that are used to pay for their hobbies. Parents use their national identity card number to access the system.

Hobby providers need to apply to have their activities registered on the system. It is the aim of Reykjavik City Council to keep the restrictions to a minimum to help as many organisations join as possible and to increase choice. However, some conditions are made relating to the experience instructors, venues and length of courses. There are approximately **230 groups and activities** across Reykjavik to take your pick from; the numbers participating are similarly impressive.

Having the system online means that Reykjavik City Council has excellent data about the levels of participation across the city, including by age, location, gender and chosen hobby. In 2023 15,662 children and young people were using the card – that is roughly 80% of the population. The most popular choice by far is football for boys and gymnastics for girls (although football is increasingly popular for girls too). They also know that uptake is lower in particular parts of the city and with families who are newly arrived in Iceland. They are able to do targeted follow-up work with these communities to encourage greater uptake.

One of the features of the Reykjavik approach that doesn't exist in all municipalities is that parents and carers can use their funding to pay for afterschool care for

6–9 year olds. The rationale for this is that afterschool care provides many hobby opportunities for this age group and parents may feel their children don't need anything additional to this. Other municipalities have taken a different decision on this subject.



Image of football pitch in Iceland

### Case Study: Helsinki co-ordination

There's a team of five paid staff that manages **the Finnish Model in Helsinki** – a lead, a project manager and three co-ordinators. To make things work they have divided the city into three and one co-ordinator takes an area of Helsinki each. They have also divided hobby topics between them.

The way Helsinki categorises hobbies is interesting. They analysed the local children and young people's survey results and put the choices into one of three 'baskets': 'sports', 'arts' or 'other' ('other' would include things like cooking, animal hobbies and coding). One co-ordinator has a responsibility for sports, one for arts and one for all the other activities. It is their role to make the connections with organisations who can deliver hobbies in this 'basket'.

There are 129 schools in Helsinki, which includes a number of bilingual Finnish/Swedish schools and schools for children and young people with additional support needs. Collectively they teach around 43,500 children and young people. That is a lot of children and young people to cater for. Practically speaking, there has to be some hobby boundaries drawn somewhere.

As with all other municipalities there is an expectation that hobbies will take place in school. The size of the challenge to do that in Helsinki is huge – the co-ordinators

in Helsinki are managing around 43 schools each. To make the system manageable (and affordable) the Helsinki team has decided to limit the hobby offer to three hobbies per school, based on the most popular survey choices for each basket.

So, for example, if the most popular choices in a school were (in order) parkour, guitar, drama, football, cooking and coding, they would choose parkour (sport), guitar (art) and cooking (other). They realise that the system is not perfect and some people will not have their first choice of hobbies available at their school, but with 129 schools to work with, they find that it is a realistic approach. And the scale of it is still huge – 209 hobby providers are working in the initiative delivering 4,000 hobby groups each week!

Children who attend a particular school have first pick of the hobbies available there. However, in order to offer more choice, and if there are spaces available, children are able to attend different types of hobbies at other schools if that is their preference. The city also makes use of non-school facilities available to it.

From a Scottish perspective both country’s approaches appear to have their advantages and disadvantages, which are outlined in Table 3 below.

**Table 3: Local co-ordination models in Finland and Iceland**

	<b>Finland</b>	<b>Iceland</b>
Advantages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focused on providing hobbies according to children’s identified preferences</li> <li>• Free of charge</li> <li>• School settings are accessible and familiar</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Leisure Card system is simple and easy to understand</li> <li>• Provides considerable choice for children and young people</li> <li>• Is available and for all children and young people</li> </ul>
Disadvantages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Size of the co-ordination task is huge, particularly in large municipalities</li> <li>• Not all preferences are catered for and there may not be capacity for all children to participate</li> <li>• School settings are not so popular with older teenagers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does not necessarily cover the full cost of hobbies</li> <li>• Different hobbies cost different amounts</li> <li>• Is expensive to operate in a country with a larger population than Iceland</li> </ul>

There are approaches in Scotland that share some features with both Icelandic and Finnish co-ordination models and could potentially be applied within a national hobby model. For example:

- The national network of **Active Schools Co-ordinators** shares some similarities with the hobby co-ordinators network.
- The existing **Young Scot Card** provides a route to disseminate entitlements to all young people aged 11-26 years.

If a national hobby model is to be developed in Scotland, considerable thought is needed to explore how the model might work locally and nationally to best build on Scottish systems and structures.

**Recommendation Four: the Scottish Government should consider how a Scottish hobby model might operate at a national and local level, building on learning from approaches developed in Finland and Iceland.**

## 6.5 Theme Five: Schools and other settings

I've talked a bit about settings and providers already and how Finland bases its hobby model around schools. It's worth spending a bit more time on this topic, however, as there is more learning to be shared here.

In Finland the idea of the hobby groups is that they take place in school, after school. That is not to say that hobby providers don't operate out of other venues as well, but for the purpose of the Finnish hobby model, schools are at the centre. In Iceland it is less specific and hobbies can be provided in any venue deemed safe and appropriate.

It might be helpful context to know that the school day in both Finland and Iceland is shorter than in Scotland, particularly for younger children. School normally finishes before 3pm regardless of age and may be before 2pm for younger ones. This is likely to be a time when most parents are working, so for practical reasons providing hobbies directly after school can be very helpful.

Younger children up to the age of 9 in both countries tend to go to after-school care, which has a cost attached. As mentioned earlier, parents and carers in Reykjavik can use their child's Leisure Card entitlement to help pay for this. The system in Finland varies from municipality to municipality, but in Helsinki the hobby entitlement does not cover Grades 1-3 because after-school care is so widely used.

### ***School based hobbies***

In Finland, locating hobbies in school means that children know where to go when the school day is over and parents don't need to worry about travel arrangements. This, co-ordinators believe, is particularly helpful for younger children who can't travel independently and children with additional support needs who have particular access requirements.

Some hobby co-ordinators I spoke to also felt it could be helpful for families from different cultural backgrounds, where hobbies might not be so much a traditional feature of children's lives. Basing hobbies in schools, they felt, helped legitimise hobbies and encouraged reluctant families to see that hobbies were worthwhile and safe activities for their children to participate in.

However, basing hobbies in schools is not without its challenges. Firstly, hobby co-ordinators are reliant on schools to provide access to their facilities, which may vary from location to location. Good relationships with headteachers are paramount, not only to gain access, but to help with timetabling and ensuring that the school is supportive overall. Reassuring schools about the quality and safety of the hobbies being provided and acting as a point of contact if things go wrong is also part of the job.

The school estate varies in Finland, as it does in Scotland, and some schools have more facilities than others. But this approach does at least provide some degree of commonality across the country - all municipalities have access to classrooms.

## Case Study: Tampere

Tampere is the second largest city in Finland and located about 180km north-west of Helsinki. There are 34 schools in Tampere and 18,500 pupils. Schools are divided into 15 of what Finland calls 'pathways' but in Scotland we would call 'clusters' (i.e. the secondary school and its feeder primary schools). The Tampere team has recruited 15 tutor teachers, one for each pathway/cluster, who take responsibility for programming the hobbies in the schools within their designated patches. This is a paid role, but sits alongside their general teaching duties.

I was shown the database which records what is happening, where, when and with whom. There are 405 hobby groups happening across the city, located in 115 different venues, delivered by 105 different partners. Around 5,450 children participate - that's about 30% of all school-aged children in the municipality.

Organisation in these circumstances is key. Schools must submit a school plan each year and the free hobbies provided under the Finnish Model should be a part of it. They are also asked to identify a development area each year, outlining where they will improve on their hobby practice. Schools can choose from one of four key areas - participation, teacher skills, whole school environment and the promotion of hobbies.

The system also relies on trust - the small team of three (and one intern) cannot be everywhere to ensure that things are happening in the ways they should. But as the main point of contact for hobbies across the city, they expect to hear from parents if something goes wrong!



Image of young people's art work in Finland

## **Non-school based activities**

In Iceland, it is up to hobby providers to provide or find venues for their activities. These must meet a number of health and safety criteria, but gives more flexibility to individual providers. Local sports clubs provide a focus for many of the sports hobbies on offer, but hobbies are also available at arts centres, youth clubs, community centres and specialist venues.

### **Case Study: Breiðablik**

There are 77 sports clubs across Iceland, each embedded within and serving their local community. Facilities are owned by the municipality but run by local charitable organisations who receive financial support to do this from the municipalities. One condition of the funding is that clubs must provide at least three sports and be open and accessible to all children and young people. To say that sports and sports participation in Iceland is a big deal is an understatement. Anecdotally much of the national male football team's international success is seen to be a result of this community sports club system.

Based in Kópavogur, Breiðablik is the largest sports club in Iceland. It is known for its football, but provides 12 different sports for children and young people, including basketball, karate, skiing and chess. The club has around 1,700 children and young people aged 6-18 regularly attending – mostly from the local neighbourhoods. From a community of 40,000 (all ages) that's an extraordinary amount. In fact in terms of numbers training regularly, it's the biggest club in Europe.

Most children attend directly after school and school buses from local schools will drop off the younger children. As with all sports clubs in Iceland, activities are run by qualified, paid instructors. While there is a competitive side to some of the sports on offer, everyone is welcomed – there is a space made for all who want to come. It might not be a huge space, however. The facilities are impressive but they are extremely full.

The club works with local schools to identify and support children and young people who may be experiencing particular difficulties. They recognise that playing sport can be especially beneficial for young people who aren't doing so well at school. However, in such a busy club maintaining the balance between providing individual support, being accessible for all and supporting those who want to train at a more competitive level is a real challenge. More capacity both in terms of facilities and staffing would I think be welcome.

In both Iceland and Finland it is interesting that, regardless of the venue, many hobbies take place directly after school before children go home for the evening. This fits well into many families' lives and leaves evenings free for families to spend time together, or on other activities.

**Recommendation Five: the Scottish Government must consider what constitutes a suitable setting for hobbies in Scotland, considering the merits of Finland's and Iceland's approaches and how they fit with Scotland's infrastructure and length of the school day.**

## 6.6 Theme Six: Hobby providers

One key message that I took home from both Iceland and Finland was their belief in the important role hobby providers and instructors play in supporting children and young people to get the most out of their hobby experiences. Under their models hobby instructors need to be over the age of 18, trained and paid for their time. These are not volunteer-led models.

The concept of 'quality' was mentioned repeatedly throughout my travels. This was not necessarily about excellence in teaching methods, but about supporting children and young people's inclusion and participation, helping to create safe, nurturing environments that enable children to foster friendships as well as develop new skills. I've described that earlier as 'youth work', which in essence it is.



Image of climbing wall in Iceland

That's not to say that all hobby providers in either country are trained youth workers. Indeed, in Finland they will tell you that this emphasis on participation and inclusion principles has demanded quite a change of style for some hobby providers, particularly if their hobbies have traditionally had a focus on elite performance.

It is a role of Finnish hobby co-ordinators to ensure hobby providers are living these principles in their work. In Lempäälä, for example, there is a detailed contract and manual that all providers must sign and adhere to which lays out all the expectations of them.

In Iceland I quickly realised that the social and health benefits of hobbies are well understood by decision makers and form the basis of the Leisure Card investment. Consequently, hobby providers are expected to deliver in ways that will foster these benefits and support positive relationships between adults and children and among children themselves.

### Case Study: PiiPoo

PiiPoo is a community arts centre located somewhat unexpectedly in a shopping mall in Lempäälä. It aims to be accessible to everyone, from birth onwards, and places considerable emphasis on inclusive approaches. It takes art activities out into the community and, as well as running a range of activities in its centre, delivers in schools as part of the Finnish hobby model. Cumulatively it works with around 25,000 people a year, including children with additional support needs.

PiiPoo co-ordinates the regional culture, health and wellbeing network and understands the impact the arts can have on children's mental health and wellbeing. They believe that art is for everyone and can be undertaken anywhere. I absolutely loved their description of baby colour bath classes, for example, where babies can crawl and roll around in safe, edible paints and make paintings on the floor. Infrastructure need not be a restriction if you can work creatively with what's on your doorstep.



## Case Study: Nes Golf Club, Seltjarnarnes, Iceland

Nes Golf Club hugs the coast in Seltjarnarnes, a town of 5,000 people located just next to Reykjavik. I met with their Sports Director and one of their youth coaches. They told me how in five years the club has gone from around 20 juniors to 200.

Many of the children that come to practice golf at Nes take part in other sports as well. However, I was told that golf also suited children who liked less competitive sports, or who didn't like team sports. It was felt that golf offered greater opportunity to tailor practice to each individual and because of this the club had been able to support autistic children and children with ADHD to participate.



Image of Nes Golf Club sign in Iceland

The numbers of participants and Nes is phenomenal. Is there a golf course in Scotland that can boast 200 juniors? I may be wrong but I doubt it. There's no reason why similar success stories couldn't happen in Scotland - but it's not as easy as lifting an effective approach from one place and landing it somewhere else.

It clearly requires individuals who have the vision to make things grow and local governments who are willing to invest. Nes' Sports Director lectures in public health at Reykjavik University so he was well able to make the case for preventative spend - I guess not everyone is lucky enough to have a public health expert as sports director!

In Nes there is an adult waiting list of 1,000 to join the club. Young people who have just turned 18 and who have practised as juniors get prioritised on the waiting list and that seems absolutely right to me. If you are taking a public health approach to sport, then children and young people will be a priority - because when you set up a habit of sports participation when people are young, you'll see lots of physical and mental health benefits across the lifespan.

It was inspiring to hear from hobby providers in Finland and Iceland and discover how participation, inclusion and public health principles are at the basis of their work. In preventative terms it makes so much sense – and the municipalities seem to get that too.

In 2012 the Scottish Government published the ‘Common Core of Skills, Knowledge & Understanding and Values for the “Children’s Workforce” in Scotland’, mapped onto the four guiding principles on the UNCRC.<sup>2</sup> It has everything in it required to develop a hobby workforce in Scotland along the same rights, wellbeing and public health basis that has been developed in Iceland and Finland. It would be worth considering how organisations currently providing hobbies in Scotland could be supported to embed the Common Core within their practice.

**Recommendation Six: Scotland should explore whether and how the Common Core is embedded within existing hobby providers’ practice in Scotland.**

## 6.7 Theme Seven: Accessibility

Both Finland and Iceland have endeavoured to deliver universal hobby models and believe that a universal approach brings multiple benefits. Most crucially they believe that hobbies should be part of all children’s lives. As such, hobby providers are expected to support the participation and inclusion of all children, including those who may be less able to engage with hobbies for whatever reason. Both countries are aware that there are some groups of children and young people who may need additional help to engage and have taken steps to address this.

### **Older teenagers**

In both Finland and Iceland hobby participation by younger children is incredibly high but drops off when children reach their teenage years. This happens in Scotland as well, and Children in Scotland’s data revealed lower levels of participation among 15- and 16-year-olds in their research last year.

There are several reasons for this. Teenagers often want to distance themselves from things they enjoyed when they were younger and explore new lifestyle choices, for example. In many ways it’s a normal part of growing up. However, people I spoke to felt strongly that hobbies can still have immense protective value at this age and therefore it was important that measures were taken to make hobbies more accessible for this age group.

In Finland they’ve found that, as a rule, teenagers don’t want to stay in school after the school day to take part in hobbies. Having a bit of flexibility to deliver activities in other venues therefore has been appreciated. In Iceland older teenagers are able to use their Leisure Card entitlements for gym membership – one of the very few exceptions to the group activities rule. This has proven a popular option, particularly among those aged 16+.

### **Case Study: Oodi – a library like no other**

Helsinki’s main library **Oodi** is a sleek modern building that manages to be both visually striking and friendly and welcoming. As well as the traditional book loan library services, it has what I can only describe as a hobby floor, including things

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.gov.scot/publications/common-core-skills-knowledge-understanding-values-childrens-workforce-scotland/pages/5/>

you wouldn't normally expect to find in a library – 3D printers, sewing machines, sound-proofed gaming rooms and a wall of guitars for loan. I visited the library multiple times during my stay in Helsinki and the hobby floor was always full of people making and playing things. Many of them were teenagers. There is also a dedicated youth space in the library where Finnish Model funded hobby activities such as coding take place. You will also see young people just hanging out there, or working quietly on laptops. It's the coolest, most dynamic library I've ever been in. I'm not surprised young people gravitate towards it.



Image of chess board in Finland

### ***Migrant and minority ethnic communities***

Based on their data, both Finland and Iceland are also aware that levels of hobby uptake are lower among families that are new to the country and/or who are from minority ethnic communities. Levels of awareness about what's on offer can be lower among these communities and some cultural barriers may also prevent participation.

Both countries are taking steps to try to encourage greater participation within these communities. In Finland this includes commissioning local organisations that support minority communities to provide hobbies directly to children they work with, such as African Care ry. They may also run hobbies in minority languages where needed – groups delivered in Ukrainian were commonly mentioned, for example.

### **🔍 Case Study: Aflagrandi 40**

In Iceland I had the great pleasure of spending a morning at Aflagrandi 40, a community house in West Reykjavik. One of the people I met with there was Sigríður Arndis Jóhannsdóttir who, amongst other things, has responsibility to welcome newly arrived migrant families into the neighbourhood. She meets with each family multiple times to help them get established in their new home, new schools and new community. One of the things she tells them about is the Leisure Card and how it works.

She encourages new families to feel like Aflagrandi 40 is a safe and inclusive space for them. It's also a place where they can learn about the language and culture of Iceland. One of the projects they've run in the past was 'read to a dog'. This is where children who are learning Icelandic read aloud to dogs to build up their confidence. The dogs don't care about grammar or pronunciation (so I am told).

Sigríður is also an expert at finding small pockets of funding from here and there. For example, she managed to persuade UEFA to give the centre some money to help children from migrant communities take up new sporting opportunities. Sigríður uses the new economics foundation's **five ways to wellbeing** to support planning and decision making. She asks will new developments help people connect, get active, take notice, learn or give back? And how can these aspects be maximised? It's a brilliantly simple and evidence-based approach. I wish it was more widely used in Scotland.

### **Children with additional support needs**

Children with additional support needs receive their education in a variety of settings in Finland and Iceland, including a mix of mainstream and special school settings. In Finland, where schools are the focus for most hobbies, hobby providers are commissioned to work with both mixed groups and specialised groups, specifically for those with additional support needs. I heard about **Yhteio Tanssi ry's** work to bring dance classes to children with additional support needs and **Ursa Minor's** sign language based hobby classes, for example.

In Iceland, families can choose from mainstream hobby providers and those who work specifically with children with additional support needs, depending on what's available in their area. It is recognised that options might be limited for severely disabled children, however, so an exception to the rule about length of courses has been lifted for this group. Children and young people with significant and complex disabilities can use their Leisure Card entitlement to pay for a specialist holiday weekend.

### **Case Study: Uuno**

One of the hobby activities I was able to participate in was for children who attended a specialist unit within a mainstream school in Lempäälä. Uuno the Dog visits this unit (with his owner), and other schools as well, as one of the animal hobbies on offer. Children who take part in Uuno's class build their confidence around animals and learn about dog behaviour, dog grooming and care. When I was there Uuno was a little bouncy and his owner asked the children what we could do to calm him down. One child suggested singing him a song, so we sang 'Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star' to him. It was a lovely moment.



Image of children's art work in Finland

### **Very rural communities**

Both Iceland and Finland contain very rural and remote communities, where the numbers of children and families are exceedingly small. This does inevitably limit the variety of hobby opportunities on offer, but efforts have been made in both countries to ensure that something is available within these municipalities as well.

Offering a bit of flexibility to the established rules can help here. The Finnish Model suggests that hobbies should take place after school, but in remote Finland children often travel long distances on school buses to get home after school and already arrive home later than children in urban areas. It has been agreed that providing hobbies at lunchtime may make more sense here. Nevertheless, this isn't a universally popular solution as it can mean that children lose unstructured play time, which also has its value. Working out what works best for each community in these circumstances is important.

**Recommendation Seven:** any Scottish hobby model should consider the needs of specific groups of children and young people, including those with protected characteristics or living in rural and remote communities.

## 6.8 Theme Eight: Evidence

I've mentioned the use of data at various points in this report and I do think that gathering and using data is an important learning point from both the Finnish and Icelandic models and one that should be a factor of any consideration of a Scottish Model.

Data is gathered and used in a number of ways across these two countries' models to:

- gather evidence about the health and wellbeing of children and young people and their risk-taking behaviours and how this changes over time
- gather evidence about the hobby preferences of children and young people and levels of current engagement in hobbies
- understand levels of hobby uptake by different hobby type, different communities and by demographics such as age and gender
- evaluate impact of hobby participation.

### **Gathering evidence about health and wellbeing**

In Iceland, where the model has been around for decades, their emphasis on and commitment to data collection is impressive. These days the Planet Youth team are responsible for the gathering and analysing local evidence about the health and wellbeing of children and young people in Iceland, which is used both to target resources and measure the impact of approaches over time.

Data about health-harming behaviours is gathered through anonymous surveys administered in school.

As mentioned at the start of this report, the Icelandic Model was introduced as a means of addressing high levels of health-harming behaviours among Icelandic youth. In 1998, at the start of their work, 42% of 15- and 16-year-olds had been drunk within the last 30 days, 23% smoked daily and 17% had tried cannabis. By 2012, the measures had reduced to under 10% for each measure and they have remained around that level ever since.<sup>3</sup>

Inevitably these statistics vary between communities, and municipalities use this data as a planning tool, injecting more resources into areas where there are more significant levels of health-harming behaviour.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://planetyouth.org>

## ***Planet Youth in Scotland***

It is important to add that there is currently a Planet Youth programme underway in **Scotland**, managed by Winning Scotland. The programme is working in six areas of Scotland (Argyll & Bute, Clackmannanshire, Dundee, Highland, West Dunbartonshire and Angus). Surveys have been administered to young people in these areas and the results are being used to develop action plans for 2024/25.

It is my hope that this report may be of help to the Planet Youth in Scotland team when they move on to the action plan implementation stage where increasing hobby provision may well feature.

### ***Gathering evidence about hobby preferences***

As mentioned earlier, the Finnish National Pupil Survey is the main source of national data about hobby preferences and participation among Finnish children and young people. The **2022 survey** found that 85% of students took part in an enjoyable leisure activity. Of the 15% of students who did not have a leisure activity, 58% would like to start.



**Image of chalk board and blocks from a library in Iceland**

It is the intention that the survey is administered to all school-aged children every two years. Schools support children to complete the survey and it is available in game form for younger children to make it more accessible.

### ***Understanding levels of hobby uptake***

In the municipalities I visited in both Finland and Iceland, data was available about levels of hobby uptake by different hobby type, different communities and by demographics such as age and gender. This could show where spare capacity existed in the system and well as which types of hobbies were most popular. Anecdotally one co-ordinator in Finland told me that this data could be an interesting comparator to national survey data, highlighting differences between what young people said they wanted to do in theory in the survey and what they signed up to in reality.

## Evaluating impact

There is a **phenomenal amount of evidence** about the Icelandic Model's approach and impact available – both within Iceland and, since it has been rolled out in other countries, from other parts of the world too.

Specific research relating to the Leisure Card approach has shown that the Leisure Card increased numbers of children and young people participating in hobbies,<sup>4</sup> that participation in sports club activities improves self-reported wellbeing among adolescents<sup>5</sup> and that structured leisure time acted as a protective factor against alcohol and cannabis use.<sup>6</sup>

Finland doesn't have the decades of activity to draw impact evidence from, but an evaluation of the first phase of the Finnish Model was published in 2023,<sup>7</sup> focusing on evidence from six municipalities that had implemented the model. The evaluation identified factors that make leisure activities fun for children and young people, including learning new skills and interacting with instructors and peers. They noted 'When the children trust their instructor, they feel braver and no longer fear failure.'

Other findings included:

- Free hobby provision enables children and young people to try out new hobbies they wouldn't otherwise try.
- For children and young people, inclusion particularly meant the ability to influence and participate in the planning of the activity's content.
- Leisure activities improved the behaviour of children in schools.

There is lots of evidence from children and young people in the evaluation report. I have included a couple of quotes (translated into English) that particularly stood out for me:

*'I go there precisely because there are friends there and it's fun there.'*

**High School Student**

*'Parkour is fun when you always learn and develop. There is nothing boring about it, just fun.'*

**Primary School Student**

*'I chose [the hobby] so that I didn't have to go home every day and play and watch and do homework, but there was something to do! It's boring being alone sometimes and when there are so many people here it's good to do things with so many.'*

**Primary School Student**

**Recommendation Eight: Scotland should build in a sound approach to monitoring and evaluation from the start of any new hobby model. This should encompass impact and process evaluation data and incorporate the views and experiences of children and young people throughout.**

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<sup>4</sup> <https://planetyouth.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Meyers-et-al.-2023.-YES-Card.-HER.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> <https://shapeamerica.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/02640414.2013.773402#.WzIjt9j7TBI>

<sup>6</sup> <https://planetyouth.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Woodward-et-al.-2023.-Risk-and-Protective-Factors.-CYSR.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.karvi.fi/en/publications/meaningful-leisure-time-friends-and-coordination-evaluation-finnish-model-leisure-activities>



## 7. Conclusions

There is no question that children's hobbies is a topic people can connect with. I suspect most people would agree that access to hobbies is a good thing and would, if asked, be able to talk about their own hobbies and those of the children around them. I also suspect that most would understand that some barriers exist to taking part in hobbies in Scotland and that learning from other countries might help us increase access. So, thankfully, I don't think that's a case that needs to be fought!

I'm struck, however, that in both Finland and Iceland there was a national imperative that drove the process of developing a country-wide hobby model. Both countries expressed concern about children and young people's wellbeing and had sufficient understanding of the role hobbies could play in promoting wellbeing and healthier lifestyles. There was also a widely held belief in the importance of hobbies as part of each and every childhood.

We should have enough of an imperative in Scotland to drive a similar national movement. Rates of child poverty and poor wellbeing should provide more than enough motivation. And incorporation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child could give us a very helpful and relevant hook upon which to pin this work.

But my suspicion is that hobbies are not yet high enough up the political agenda in Scotland in order to develop anything near the scale of ambition of the Icelandic or Finnish models. In my experience, hobbies are not (yet) being talked about as a vital part of childhood nor as providing a serious contribution to improving children's outcomes.

The Covid-19 pandemic experience threw so much up in the air for children and young people and the structures that surround and support them. In Scotland one of the things it prompted was a **National Discussion on Education** to explore the future of Scottish education in light of the Covid-19 experience. I believe we need a national discussion about hobbies.

Conversations in and of themselves don't necessarily achieve change, of course. And children and young people can get very tired of telling adults about their lives without it being obvious how and whether their information is being used to make decisions. But are we confident we know enough about what children and young people think about hobbies in Scotland to move forward at pace? I was told in Finland that if adults had guessed what children wanted to do, they would have chosen ice hockey. Not parkour, not cooking, not animal hobbies (sorry, Uuno).

Do we know what children and young people in Scotland want to do in their free time? What excites, motivates and inspires them? And crucially how we can make this a reality for them all, regardless of their personal circumstances? These are the types of conversations I think we need to be having next.

The Finnish and Icelandic models can help provide us with confidence that solutions are possible. They can help give us ideas around the building blocks that are necessary to make a nationwide system work, including participation, money, co-ordination, settings, providers, accessibility and evidence.

What we need now is a collective will to make a difference.





## 8. Recommendations

**Recommendation One:** Scotland should hold a national conversation about hobbies and explore their role and value for children and young people across the country. This should involve children and young people, parents/carers, hobby providers, schools and decision makers at local authority and national levels.

**Recommendation Two:** any Scottish hobby model should build in children and young people's participation from the start and involve children and young people at all levels. This should be framed with a child rights lens.

**Recommendation Three:** the Scottish Government should map the nature and extent of current funding for hobbies in Scotland and scope out options for more effective coalescence of that funding under one national hobby model.

**Recommendation Four:** the Scottish Government should consider how a Scottish hobby model might operate at a national and local level, building on learning from approaches developed in Finland and Iceland.

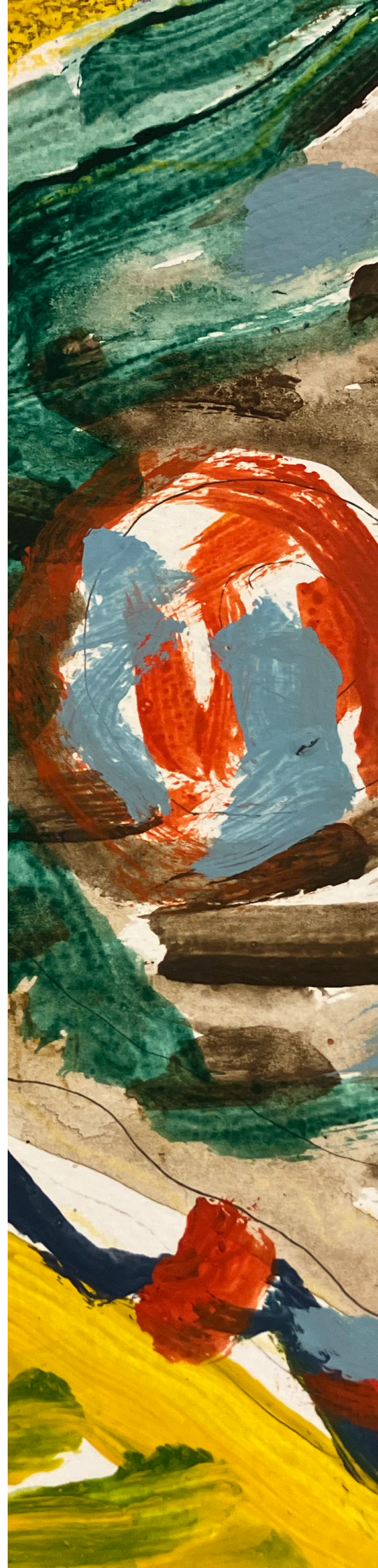
**Recommendation Five:** the Scottish Government must consider what constitutes as suitable settings for hobbies in Scotland, considering the merits of Finland's and Iceland's approaches and how they fit with Scotland's infrastructure and length of the school day.

**Recommendation Six:** Scotland should explore to what extent and how the Common Core is embedded within existing hobby providers' practice in Scotland.

**Recommendation Seven:** any Scottish hobby model should consider the needs of specific groups of children and young people, including those with protected characteristics or living in rural and remote communities.

**Recommendation Eight:** Scotland should build in a sound approach to monitoring and evaluation from the start of any new hobby model. This should encompass impact and process evaluation data and incorporate the views and experiences of children and young people throughout.

Image of young person's art work in Iceland



## Appendix One: About the author

Hello, my name is Amy and I am a tap-dancer, sometime painter, terrible but enthusiastic guitar player and lover of long-distance walks. Hobbies have always been important to me, as something I do for myself and with friends. Over the years I've had a go at all sorts of things: pottery, photography, so many different types of dance I can't remember, yoga, roller derby, badminton, singing – to name a few. While I've not necessarily stayed with all of these hobbies, I've loved the glimpses of hobbyists' worlds and the knowledge, expertise and companionship they hold.



My day job is as Chief Executive of Parenting Across Scotland, where my goal is to help create a Scotland where all parents and families are valued and supported to give children the best possible start in life. Obviously I think that hobbies are part of this! I'm also on the Board of Scottish Ensemble, a pioneering group of outstanding musicians. They know well the profound impact music can have on our lives and it is a real privilege to be a small part of that organisation.

Before my current role, I was Head of Policy, Projects and Participation for Children in Scotland, the national network organisation improving children's lives, and before that a mental health researcher for about 12 years. My work in recent years has all been about how we use evidence to achieve change and I've long been convinced by the impact arts and leisure activities can have on mental health and wellbeing for children, young people and adults as well.

To say that I now know more about the Finnish and Icelandic models of hobbies as a result of my Fellowship is something of an understatement. Spending six weeks taking a deep dive into these two countries' approaches was illuminating, inspiring and invigorating.

But my view of what constitutes a hobby has also widened, joyously. This Fellowship has renewed my commitment to my own hobby practice, and emphasised the importance of adults protecting time for hobbies as well.

So I feel a duty, now this report has been produced, to do something with it and to try my best to share my learning from this Fellowship with the wider children, youth and families sector in Scotland and beyond. It's going to take a collective effort to get hobbies further up the political agenda. If you'd like to have a chat with me about this, you can find me on [LinkedIn](#).

And a final word of encouragement – if you have an idea that you think might make a good focus for a Churchill Fellowship, go and do one yourself