



# Making geography real

## Managing risks on Advanced Higher Geography field trips

### Why make the visits?



The Scottish Advanced Higher (AH) Geography course requires pupils (aged 16-17 years) to conduct independent research and gather evidence by completing fieldwork and analysing their findings. AH Geography teachers at Firrhill High School, Edinburgh, developed a series of field trips to enable pupils to develop these skills in a progressive manner.

Four categories of field trip, each aimed at teaching appropriate geographical techniques for gathering human and physical information, were developed. These included:

- classifying urban land use in the suburban area around the school (two hours);
- gathering and analysing the land use and pedestrian numbers in Edinburgh's Central Business District (CBD) (three hours);
- investigating changing vegetation cover and soil characteristics in the Pentland Hills, just outside Edinburgh (half a day); and
- assessing the impact of tourism on a Perthshire village, as well as analysing river variables on a two-day residential visit to Kindrogan Field Study Centre (FSC).

### How did they plan the visits?

The two local trips required little planning, other than gathering appropriate pupil resources. For these trips, the school also obtained parental consent.

For the Pentland Hills trip, a preliminary visit to check the suitability of the site and the viability of the fieldwork was undertaken by a member of the teaching staff.

For the residential trip to Perthshire, the teacher liaised with the FSC to plan the fieldwork.

For all the trips, the following issues were included in their planning considerations:

- transport – walking, public transport or minibus;
- weather – including the ability to change plans as required;
- medical issues and pupils becoming ill; and
- staffing levels and staff roles for each trip.

### How did they manage the risks?

The risks associated with the two local area visits were identified as minimal. Pupils were familiar with these environments, and were considered to be of a responsible age to make their own judgements on the risks. This was made clear during the briefing for the tasks.

The Pentland Hills and Perthshire trips posed different challenges in managing risks.

Risks were quickly and easily understood using existing site-specific assessments compiled by FSC and the school's generic risk assessments.

#### **Travel**

Mnibuses were hired, via the Council and driven by a teacher who was appropriately licensed.



#### **Communication**

Briefings were provided in advance to pupils about the hill environment and their responsibilities, including the need to wear appropriate clothing, and expected behaviour.

#### **Staff experience/training**

The teacher was competent in hill environments, first aid and had received training on organising visits.

### **What were the results?**

Pupils successfully developed their data gathering and practical problem solving techniques to gain the high order skills necessary in the research, evaluation and presentation of geographical information. What's more, they had fun along the way! One pupil commented that fieldwork trips '... allow me to apply my knowledge and understanding in a practical way'. Another said 'They help me to understand the concepts learnt in class more fully'.

Well planned fieldwork and very good final exam results, which have been repeated, has meant that the AH Geography course remains a popular course choice.

Fieldwork has become an important element of geography teaching incorporated into all year groups at the school, irrespective of class size.

#### **Neil Boyd, Trip Organiser, said:**

'The marrying of theory and concepts learnt in the classroom with practical, hands-on fieldwork is powerful pedagogy. Pupils start 'getting it'. They start to make connections between a lifeless text and an inspiring, living landscape. The combination of school and council paperwork that needs to be completed for these trips can seem onerous but when you take pupils into a hill environment, it is necessary to ensure that trips are safe and well organised. The key to managing risks on trips is to ensure staff have taken part in high quality, appropriate continuous professional development and to establish good communication between pupils, parents and staff.'