Comhlámh
GLOBAL SOLIDARITY IN ACTION

Ethical & Responsible Student Travel

A guide and self-assessment tool for schools



Comhlámh Publication 2026

Acknowledgements

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About Comhlámh

Established in 1975, Comhlámh is the Irish association of international development workers and volunteers. As a membership organization, we build and mobilise community around global justice issues. Comhlámh nurtures and supports work for change, locally and globally, and advocates for a world beyond injustice.

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Introduction

International travel experiences can make a significant contribution to young people's learning. They can help students develop a deeper understanding of global issues, build meaningful connections across cultures, and reflect on their role as active global citizens. For many schools, these experiences are an important dimension of Global Citizenship Education programmes and of building students' commitment to solidarity and social justice. At the same time, meaningful engagement with communities in the Global South requires careful planning and thoughtful decision-making. Schools have a responsibility to ensure that travel experiences are safe, respectful, and beneficial for everyone involved. This means considering not only the experience of travelling students, but also the rights, dignity, wellbeing, and priorities of the communities that welcome them.

The purpose of this resource is to support schools in planning and assessing international travel experiences in a way that is ethical, educational, and grounded in good practice. It is designed to help school leaders, boards of management, teachers, and trip organisers ask informed questions about proposed travel programmes, partnerships, and activities. The resource encourages schools to approach international travel as an opportunity for learning, solidarity, and mutual exchange. It promotes an approach that values local knowledge and leadership, supports sustainable development, and places safeguarding and human dignity at its centre.

By using the self-assessment tool, schools can strengthen their decision-making and ensure that international travel experiences reflect both their educational goals and their commitment to responsible global engagement. The aim is to support experiences that enrich student learning while fostering respectful, positive and enduring relationships with host communities.

Key Considerations for Schools

Most international travel experiences are developed with positive intentions and can provide valuable learning opportunities for students. However, good intentions alone do not guarantee positive outcomes. Schools should take time to consider how a proposed trip, partnership, or programme may affect both students and host communities.

The following issues are particularly important when assessing international travel opportunities.

Preparation

A school trip which provides a meaningful learning experience depends on thoughtful preparation before travel. Time and resources must be invested in carrying out due diligence about the host partner and any third party provider, reviewing internal policies and procedures, and ensuring that students and staff are adequately prepared.

Learning and Reflection

Students should be encouraged to approach travel as an opportunity to learn, listen, and build relationships. Framing students as "helpers" can unintentionally reinforce unequal power dynamics and stereotypes, and overlook the knowledge, skills, and leadership that already exist within communities. In preparation, students should be supported to explore the wider social, economic, historical, and political contexts of the communities they visit. Students should also be supported to have opportunities for critical reflection afterwards.

There are also many ways to promote global learning and North-South partnerships that do not involve travel, including through the use of Global Citizenship Education approaches in the classroom. Check out WorldWise Global Schools for more information, including their Global School Partnership Guide.

Safeguarding and Child Protection

The rights, dignity, wellbeing, and safety of all children must be protected. This includes considering whether proposed activities are in the best interests of children and comply with appropriate safeguarding standards.

Do not visit orphanages or other residential care facilities for children

Do not visit or support an orphanage or other residential care facility for children as part of your school trip. Growing up in institutional care is harmful to children, causing significant harm to physical, social, and emotional development. 80% of children in orphanages have at least one living parent. All children have the right to family life and can grow up in this setting with the right support. Well-intentioned support for orphanages helps to sustain this model of care, with the constant flow of visitors exacerbating the trauma experienced by vulnerable children. Check out the travel advice issued by the Irish Government, warning about the harm caused.

Local Leadership and Sustainability

Strong programmes are developed in partnership with host communities and are guided by local knowledge, priorities, and expertise. Communities themselves are best placed to identify their needs and aspirations. Travel experiences should contribute to positive, sustainable outcomes and avoid activities that may create dependency or undermine local capacity.

Respect and Dignity

All interactions should be grounded in respect for the rights, dignity, cultures, and lived experiences of others. Students should be supported to engage in ways that challenge stereotypes, promote mutual understanding, and recognise power differentials. Global Citizenship Education approaches should be used to explore these questions. Check out resources from Comhlámh and Tearfund Ireland to delve into some of these questions in more detail.

Having considered these key issues, we now invite you to go a bit deeper. International travel can be a valuable educational experience for students, offering opportunities for learning, reflection, and global engagement. It is essential, however, that activities undertaken during travel do not cause harm to host communities.

While international school trips can be a powerful form of experiential learning, they can also have unintended negative impacts, particularly in programmes involving children.

Schools have a duty of care not only to travelling students but also to the communities that host them. This includes ensuring that students do not participate in activities that may be harmful or inappropriate. There are many ways for students to engage positively and responsibly with communities in the Global South. This Self-Assessment Tool has been developed to support schools to design, assess, and experience ethical student travel that is mutually beneficial for both students and host communities.

The tool is adapted from *ETHICAL & RESPONSIBLE STUDENT TRAVEL - A self-assessment tool for schools and universities* (2019) - developed as part of a joint initiative between Save the Children Australia and World Challenge, through membership of the ReThink Orphanages Network. The original version, first developed for Australian schools, goes into more detail on many of the topics raised, with guidance and issues to consider.



1 Internal Assessment

Section 1 is an internal self-assessment for schools and looks at policies and procedures within schools regarding child safeguarding in an international context. If the adequate policies and procedures are not in place, the school should work with the host organisation and/or third party provider to develop them and should not proceed with the project until they are in place.

	YES	NO	Guidance Notes	Action Notes
Liability Insurance				
Does our school insurance policy provide adequate liability cover for international travel?			An adequate liability insurance policy (including scope for international travel to the destination country) is essential for a school trip. It protects the school, staff and students from severe financial and legal consequences if a participant causes bodily harm, third party injury or property damage.	
Child Safeguarding Policy				
Does our Child Protection/ Safeguarding Policy include a section on international travel, and does it take into account the protection needs of children in the destination country?			International student travel presents unique risks to traveling students and local children in destination communities. Best practice is for Child Protection/Safeguarding Policies to have a specific section dedicated to international student travel. This should identify the risks to students and local children and specific mitigation strategies to avoid those risks.	
Internal Procedures				
Is there an induction process for travelling staff and students prior to international travel?			International travel presents unique risks for staff, students and local communities. Everyone travelling should receive a comprehensive induction about expected standards of behaviour. This should guidance related to: • Safeguarding • Cultural sensitivities and practices • Insurance cover • The human rights context in the host country, including gender rights and LGBTQIA+ rights.	
Is there a Reporting Process in place for students to report on any issues experienced during their travel experience?			A Reporting Process ensures students have a clear mechanism for reporting any issues experienced during their travel. This may include risk of harm / exposure to harm, or witnessing or suspecting harm to local children and other vulnerable community members. Best practice is for a Reporting Process to be in place that is clearly communicated, explained and accessible to traveling students. The Reporting Process should include examples of reportable incidents, advice on roles and responsibilities of specific individuals, and guidance on how and when to report.	

Background checks				
Have all travelling adults undergone recent Garda vetting and/or a police clearance check?			Securing Garda Vetting/Police Clearance Certificate for all adults is crucial in ensuring student travel experiences are safe for students, teachers and local communities. Best practice is for all adult participants (including students over the age of 18) to undergo Garda vetting/ police clearance check prior to being approved for participation. Whilst Garda vetting may not be conducted on those under the age of 18, schools have a duty of care to supervise and accompany their students at all times when in the presence of children. This is to prevent the risk of harm to children by students who may have an unknown history of perpetrating abuse on others or have a history of sexualized behaviours. Schools must show due diligence by preventing any students with a known history of violence, abuse, or harm to children or others from traveling.	
Interaction with adults in the host community				
Is there a process in place for supervising student interaction with adult members of the local community when travelling?			In the course of their travel students may come into contact with adult members of the local community, presenting a safeguarding risk. Best practice is to ensure that both the school and partner organisation have a clear policy in place regarding supervision of travelling students, both for their protection and for those they come into contact with.	
Student Preparation and Learning				
Is there a preparation course provided to students in advance?			Students should be provided with a preparation course which outlines: • Their roles, responsibilities • Explores cultural difference using Global Citizenship Education approaches • Address important development issues such as Sustainability/White Saviourism/Local participation Best practice is for students to participate in a learning capacity, understanding their role as guests clearly. Please note that the preparation course should be offered with input from the host partner and, where applicable, in collaboration with the third-party provider.	
Are there clear learning objectives for the project that align with the curriculum?			School trips can provide great learning opportunities but those opportunities have to be scaffolded and maximized. Best practice is for providers to state learning objectives that are mapped to the relevant curriculum.	
Are there structured opportunities for reflection during and after the project?			Reflection helps students to consider their experiences and learning and allows participants to challenge their assumptions/ preconceptions Best practice is for structured group reflection sessions to take place periodically during a project, with psychological debriefing offered on return.	

2 Project Assessment

Section 2 requires the assessor to consider various aspects of an international school trip – referred to below as the 'project'.

Schools may have a direct relationship with the host organisation that delivers the project on the ground, or alternatively they may utilise a third party provider such as a volunteer sending agency, student travel business, travel agency or other mechanism to organise their experience. Section 2 questions should be answered with regard to the project the students will be participating in while abroad. Schools using a third party provider are still required to have access to this information as part of the due diligence process.

Completed assessments may indicate some amber and red flags associated with the project. Amber flags should be raised with the host organisation and/or third party provider, with the school working with them to address issues where possible and appropriate. The project should not proceed until all amber flags are addressed and appropriate structures are in place. If any red flags are identified during the assessment the project should not proceed under any circumstances. All red flags relate to visits to orphanages and healthcare facilities.



	YES	NO	Guidance Notes	Action Notes
Transparency				
Are you directly in contact with the host organisation where the project is located (do you have their name, location, and contact details)?			Some third party providers do not reveal information about their host organisations ahead of travel. This does not allow travellers to do their due diligence on the host organisation or make an informed choice. Best practice is for all host organisation details to be freely provided and direct communication to be made available.	Amber Flag – If a provider is unable to give you full details of the organisation that will host you it indicates a serious lack of transparency
Interactions with children				
Does the project involve interaction with children?			Projects that interact with children carry unique risks. Interaction between children and visitors or tourists can be highly disruptive to children's important daily routines, including their education. In the areas visited by school trips, children are often extremely vulnerable and may have a complex and traumatic background, which may be exacerbated by interaction with strangers. Best practice is for projects where there is interaction with children to be supervised, structured and limited.	Amber Flag – If yes, the school must be fully satisfied that these interactions take place in supervised, structured and appropriate ways that minimise the risk of harm and abuse
Homestays				
Does the project involve a 'homestay' component, where students stay in family homes in the local community?			Homestay experiences carry unique risks to both traveling students and children in host communities. There is a need to ensure that everyone involved is aware of their rights and responsibilities. Host communities should be supported and resourced to ensure that the appropriate procedures are in place. Best practice is to ensure that host families receive adequate training and undergo vetting through established local processes. Homestay communities and the children in them should also have received training and information on the risks as well as strategies for self-protection.	Amber Flag – If yes, further information on the homestay policies and procedures are required. This should include evidence of Child Protection/ Safeguarding Policies and evidence that host communities and families have been adequately supported to ensure that the appropriate procedures are in place
Children's Residential Care Institutions				
Does the project involve visiting an orphanage or other residential care institution? (Residential care refers to all institutions housing children overnight – this includes orphanages, shelters, safe houses, children's homes, children's villages, boarding schools, rehabilitation centres, transitional homes etc.)			Residential care is an outdated and harmful model of care for all children, and over 70 years of research shows that children thrive in families and are harmed in institutions – and that this harm is lifelong, and sometimes intergenerational. The harms children experience growing up in residential care are exacerbated by the presence and constant flow of short-term visitors and volunteers. Children in residential care may have been trafficked to meet the demand for volunteer experiences, a form of modern slavery. Schools should NOT visit residential care institutions while traveling due to the unacceptable risk of harm to local children.	Red Flag – If yes, completely avoid this project

Health projects				
Does the project involve a visit to a healthcare facility?			Some programmes involve visits to healthcare facilities. Patients in healthcare facilities are extremely vulnerable and it can be hard to ensure patient privacy and confidentiality when visitor groups are allowed inside facilities. Second-level students are not qualified to deliver healthcare in any capacity. Any visit to healthcare facilities should have specified mutually beneficial objectives and should not allow any access to vulnerable patients.	Red Flag – If yes, avoid unless there are specified mutually-beneficial objectives and adequate protections for vulnerable patients are in place
Construction projects				
Does the project involve construction work?			Many projects involve construction work and manual labour that is physically satisfying and a team can work on together. In these cases the quality of the infrastructure needs to be carefully checked and maintenance provided for in the project plan. There is an additional risk of students replacing local workers. Best practice is for all construction projects to have a clear rationale as to why students are involved in the project and how safety, quality and long-term usability can be guaranteed. Students should not perform tasks that they would not be qualified to do at home.	Amber Flag – If yes, ensure that adequate safety and quality checks are in place, and that local workers are not being replaced
Participation and Sustainability				
Are the people who run the project from the host community, and is the project part of a locally led, long-term approach to change?			People know their development needs best and should be able to self-determine what they want in their own communities. Community leaders will remain in the country and be able to offer ongoing on the ground support. Projects are most effective when they support lasting change and respond to priorities identified by local people. Best practice ensures that the project is community-led and part of a long-term, locally-led approach to change.	Amber Flag – If no, consider avoiding due to risk of project not meeting community, self-identified needs
Student Roles				
Are students presented as "helpers" coming to provide a service?			Portraying visitors as "helpers" can reinforce unequal power dynamics, particularly when the visitors are school students with limited relevant skills or experience. Experiences intended to support communities can sometimes place greater emphasis on the learning and personal development of visitors than on addressing community priorities or advancing long-term social justice outcomes. Best practice is to ensure that students are presented as "learners" coming to offer solidarity in the spirit of mutual exchange.	Amber Flag – If yes, consider working with the host organisation and/or third party provider to strengthen the Global Citizenship Education provided as part of the school trip

Has a risk management plan been developed that specifically addresses the risks of international student visits to the local community?			International travel is inherently risky, and school trips often involve activities that add to that risk. A risk management plan should transparently identify those risks and articulate clear mitigation strategies as well as provide details of local resources, facilities and emergency contacts and services, as well as an evacuation plan. Best practice is for the risk management plan to be shared transparently with partners.	Amber Flag - If no, consider working with the host organisation and/or third party provider to develop a risk management plan for the project
Is it clear how the school and students can make a complaint, and what action will be taken in the event a complaint is made?			Having open and transparent channels for complaints shows a commitment to quality and is an important mechanism for protecting students, staff, children and local communities. Best practice is for the project to give information on how to make a formal complaint and who it will be heard by, as well as who is responsible for following up on any safeguarding issues.	Amber Flag - If no, consider working with the host organisation and/or third party provider to support the development of a complaints procedure for the project
Does the project explore the global development issues being addressed by the project, and how students will contribute to this?			Most international opportunities seek to address perceived development needs in communities. Best practice is for students to be able to maximise their learning about needs and issues identified through structured learning activities, using Global Citizenship Education approaches.	Amber Flag – If no, consider working with the host organisation and/or third party provider to strengthen the Global Citizenship Education provided as part of the school trip



3 Assessing host organisations

Section 3 assesses the host organisation that is on the ground in the country where the project is taking place. The hosting organisation could be, for example, an NGO, a religious organisation, or an educational organisation. If you are using a third-party provider, the provider should be able to answer these questions or put you directly in contact with the host organisation, and it is a Red Flag if they are unwilling to do so. As above, amber flags should be raised with the host organisation and/or third party provider, with the school working with them to address issues where possible and appropriate. The project should not proceed until all amber flags are addressed and appropriate structures are in place.

	YES	NO	Guidance Notes	Action Notes
Registration				
Is the host organisation registered with the appropriate authorities (as a business, NGO, or other entity) and can they provide a copy of the current, dated registration?			Official registration ensures that there is some level of accountability to an outside authority. It is good to know whether the partner is a profit-making company. Best practice is to only partner with organisations that can produce current registration documents. If documents are not available in English, the school should request an official translation or seek assistance from a qualified translator to understand the document.	Red Flag – If no, avoid due to risk of engagement with an unregistered, unregulated organisation
Finances				
Does the host organisation make audited financial reports available, and do they provide clear documentation showing the breakdown of finances for the project ?			In most countries, organisations need to be audited, and non-profits have to make these reports publicly available. Projects may have varied funding sources and it is important that the finances are well managed. Best practice is for audited financial reports to be transparent and available, and for a clear project budget to be made available.	Amber flag – If no, seek clarification about the financial procedures that are in place before proceeding

4 Assessing third party providers

Section 4 only needs to be completed if a third-party provider is facilitating the school trip. A third-party provider may be a volunteer sending agency, a faith-based group, or a travel company based in Ireland or internationally. As above, your assessment may indicate some amber and red flags associated with the project. Amber flags should be raised with the host organisation and/or third party provider, with the school working with them to address issues where possible and appropriate. The project should not proceed until all amber flags are addressed and appropriate structures are in place. If any red flags are identified during your assessment the project should not proceed under any circumstances.

	YES	NO	Guidance Notes	Action Notes
Child Safeguarding Policy				
Does the provider have a Child Safeguarding/ Protection Policy, and does it meet or exceed the standards of the school policy?			Third Party Providers that deal with student travel have responsibilities towards both the students that travel on their programmes and children that interact with their programme in the host country. Without a Child Protection Policy in place, there is no mechanism to assess risks to children, and to address these risks. A Third Party Provider's Child Protection Policy should as a minimum meet, or exceed the standards of the educational institution's own Policy. Best practice is for all entities that have contact with children under the age of 18 to have a Child Safeguarding Policy in place. This Policy should be publicly available. Schools should compare the Third Party Provider's Policy with their own, to ensure that all aspects of care and protection for students and host communities are addressed.	Red Flag – If no, avoid and do not work with this provider
Does the provider's Child Protection Policy specifically take into account and address the protection needs of children in international destinations?			International student travel presents unique risks to traveling students and local children in destination communities. Best practice is for Third Party Provider Child Protection Policies to have a specific section dedicated to children in host communities. The policy should identify the risks both to students and to local children, and specific mitigation strategies to prevent those risks from occurring.	Amber flag – if no, consider finding a different provider that prioritises child protection
Does the provider offer visits to or volunteer placements to orphanages or other residential care institutions? (Residential care refers to all institutions housing children overnight – this includes orphanages, children's homes, shelters, residential street children services, foster homes, boarding schools etc.)			Residential care is an outdated and harmful model of care for all children. Over 70 years of research shows that children thrive in families and are harmed in institutions – and that this harm is lifelong, and sometimes intergenerational. The harms children experience growing up in residential care are exacerbated by the presence of short-term visitors and volunteers. Children in residential care may have been trafficked to meet the demand for volunteer experiences, a form of modern slavery. Schools should NOT travel with any provider that offers visits or volunteering at residential care institutions, even if your trip will not visit one.	Red Flag – If yes, completely avoid using this provider. Even if the trip you are considering does not visit a residential care institution. The organisation is still supporting a harmful practice.

Code of Conduct				
Does the provider have a Code of Conduct for all persons travelling?			Facilitating international student travel that engages with local communities presents unique risks for Third Party Provider staff, volunteers, and local communities. Best practice is for the Third Party Provider to have a Code of Conduct in place that specifies standards of acceptable and unacceptable behaviour for staff, students and teachers. This should include a section which specifically addresses behaviour toward and around children and other community members, and rules around gifting giving and donations.	Amber Flag – If no, consider finding another provider that has a Code of Conduct in place
Is there a Reporting Process in place for participants to report on any issues experienced during their travel experience?			A Reporting Process ensures participants have a clear mechanism for reporting any issues experienced during their travel. This may include risk of harm / exposure to harm or witnessing or suspecting harm to local children and other vulnerable community members. Best practice is for a Reporting Process to be in place that is clearly communicated, explained and accessible to participants. The Reporting Process should include examples of reportable incidents, advice on roles and responsibilities of specific individuals, and guidance on how and when to report.	Amber Flag – If no, consider finding another provider that has a reporting procedure in place
Formal Agreement				
Is there a formal agreement / MOU in place between the school and the Third Party Provider that clearly defines the terms of the relationship?			Written agreements can set expectations and ensure that both sides understand what they are committing to. Best practice is to have a clear written agreement that is signed by both parties.	Amber Flag – If no, consider finding another provider who will engage in a formal agreement
Mission / Theory of Change				
Does the provider collect and present evidence of progress toward their objectives outlined in their mission statement/Theory of Change?			Organisations with a social mission should be able to provide evidence of change. This could be provided through annual reports, monitoring reports, or strategic plans. Some providers do not collect this information and so make unsubstantiated claims about their work. Best practice is for evidence of change to be collected and clearly presented in reports.	Amber Flag – If no, consider finding another provider who can provide evidence of change
Finances				
Is the Third Party Provider able to provide recent financial reports?			Financial reports show financial health and making them available ensures transparency. Best practice is for providers to make financial reports available.	Amber Flag – If no, consider finding another provider who is able to be transparent around financial reporting

Do financial reports clearly show the annual breakdown and distribution of programme fees, including donations or payments made to local partners in-country?			Third Party Providers may have differing business models in relation to how much of a programme fee reaches local communities through direct payments, or donations. Understanding how much of the programme fee per student is passed on to the local community through direct payments or donations enables transparency and can be a mechanism for tracking impact. Best practice is for financial reports to clearly show how programme fees are spent, and the funding distributed to host organisations.	Amber Flag – If no, ask for detailed information to be provided. If this is not provided, consider finding another provider who is able to be transparent around financial reporting
Supervision / Staffing				
Does the provider provide a dedicated staff member to manage students on the project?			Second-level students travelling internationally need to be carefully managed. Best practice is for the provider to have a dedicated staff member who liaises with the volunteers and local host organisation. Best practice is for the provider to have a dedicated staff member who liaises with the students, teachers, and local host organisations.	Amber Flag – If no, ask for further information about the supervision procedures that are in place
Ethical Communications				
Has the Third Party provider signed up to the Dóchas Ethical Communications Guide (or equivalent), and is there a policy in place around the sharing of images and messages?			The Third Party provider should be able to demonstrate their commitment to ethical communications, by being a signatory to the Dóchas Ethical Communications Guide (or equivalent) and by working to promote ethical approaches to communications in their practice. Images and messages shared by students can reinforce stereotypes about host communities, depict people in vulnerable situations, and take away privacy, dignity and security. Additionally, images and messages are often obtained and shared without informed consent. Students and staff should only share messages on social media about the local community that are in line with the values of the Dóchas Ethical Communications Guide. Best practice is not to allow the sharing of images of local community members on social media by students or staff.	Amber Flag – If yes, consider finding another provider that can demonstrate a commitment to Ethical Communications
Does the Third Party provider use photos that depict people as alone, sick, vulnerable or in poverty in their marketing materials?			Using marketing images of children and other vulnerable people that depict them as alone, sick, vulnerable or in poverty breaches ethical standards around the dignified portrayal of others and can reinforce harmful stereotypes. Best practice is to use images that uphold the privacy, dignity, and security of the local community. Where images of children are used, best practice is to depict groups of children together. Children should always be fully clothed in images.	Amber Flag – If yes, consider finding another provider that can demonstrate a commitment to Ethical Communications

Advocacy				
Does the Third Party provider offer ways and opportunities for students to get involved in the issue/ cause in the future?			Many projects involve students engaging in an issue for a short period of time after which they leave and have no contact or knowledge of the ongoing progress of the project. These types of projects offer little benefit for local communities and represent a lost opportunity for students to return home and advocate on this issue. Best practice is ensuring that on return home students have been equipped with the knowledge and resources to practically engage with the issue they have been working on, and are supported to stay involved and to take informed action.. This is an important part of ensuring these activities have a long-term impact on both the community project and the student themselves.	Amber Flag – If no, consider working with the host organisation and third party provider to strengthen the Global Citizenship Education provided on return from the school trip



Helpful Resources

WorldWise Global School Global Schools Partnership Guide

Just Care: Just Volunteering Resource

Global School Partnerships Guide

Ethical and Responsible Student Travel - Original Publication

Better Care Network Resources

OSCE Orphanage Trafficking Report

ECPAT Case Study


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