

Cross-Party Group on Outdoor Education

14 March 2024 – 13:00-14:00

Minute

Present

MSPs

Liz Smith MSP
Brian Whittle MSP

Invited guests

Avril Nicol – Aberdeenshire Council
Susi Mclarty – Aberdeenshire Council
Iona McCroary – St Modan’s High School

Non-MSP Group Members

Paul Bayton – SU Scotland
Rachel Luxton – SU Scotland
Phil Thompson – Ardroy Outdoor Education Centre
Mike Harvey – Office of Liz Smith MSP
Neil Wightwick – Blairvadach
Lee Musson – Rock UK
Rory Edwards – Scouts Scotland
Neil Baird – Scouts Scotland
Frazer Horswell – Scouts Scotland
Peter Moir – Duke of Edinburgh Award
Nick March – AHOEC
Freda Fallon – Outward Bound
Rob Bushby – Wilderness Scotland
Jamie Miller – Scottish Outdoor Education Centres
Prof Peter Higgins – University of Edinburgh

Apologies

Daniel Johnson MSP
Rachel Hamilton MSP
Beatrice Wishart MSP
Stuart Younie MSP
Mark Ruskell MSP
Toby Clark – John Muir
David Exeter – Outward Bound

Peter Wilson – Ardentinney
Andrew Bradshaw - SAPOE

Agenda item 1

Welcome and update by Liz Smith MSP

Liz Smith MSP welcomed attendees and provided a brief update on the Outdoor Residential (Scotland) Bill, intimating that although there was a lot of work going on behind the scenes formal progress was slow due to Parliament staffing.

Liz thanked Mike Harvey for his hard work in preparing the financial memorandum to support the Bill as well as the Cabinet Secretary for Education for her encouraging engagement.

Liz then introduced the main topic for the meeting - investment in outdoor education, the drivers, barriers and what is needed to meet the ambitions of the proposed Bill.

Agenda item 2

Presentations

Nick March of AHOEC set the scene for the other speakers, providing an overview of the current building stock of the Scottish outdoor education estate which he described as the most significant investment challenge facing outdoor educators.

Key points included:

- There is a wide range of stock – often originally buildings that no-one else wanted – which has moved gradually from local authority to third sector ownership.
- The majority is now third sector owned with around 25% private sector. Of the local authority settings that still exist some are staffed full time but others are only operational when groups are on site.
- “The building” is vital to outdoor education provision but upkeep of it is often neglected to drive costs for young people down – this is what in time causes centres to close.

The majority of operational centres face significant upkeep challenges and are increasingly having to look to alternative funding methods – eg crowdfunding – to close the gap. Nick then introduced Neil Baird, Head of Outdoor Education at Scouts Scotland, who gave an overview of the charity’s investment model and the upkeep challenges it was facing. Key points included:

- Scouts Scotland runs three centres and has a depreciation based investment strategy to manage upkeep.

- This covers repairs but not like for like replacements which requires additional capital investment – fundraising and legacy gifts have helped plug the gap but the environment is increasingly challenging.
- During the Covid-19 pandemic next to no capital investment was possible, this means there is a significant backlog and depreciation values are dropping at a time when costs are rising.
- Spending decisions are now being driven by the need to comply and ensure a sustainable future, for example installing a new septic tank at significant cost to meet SEPA regulations even though it would not add to young people's experience.

Nick March thanked Neil and briefly discussed the differences between the upkeep challenges facing third sector and local authority centres. Mentioning that while most third sector centres had no choice to spend to survive, most local authority sectors were better maintained due to their public funding models. Nick also pointed out that local authorities are heavily reliant on the third sector for outdoor education provision. Nick then introduced Avril Nicol, Head of Service for Communities, Wellbeing & Partnerships at Aberdeenshire Council, who discussed the opening of a new centre in the region and the investment journey that funded it. Key points included:

- The new 30 bed centre, planned to open in next two months, will include staff accommodation as well as nordic skiing which is a unique offer in the UK.
- The local authority has invested 3 million pounds over the last two years into outdoor education infrastructure to support delivery.
- The importance to the sector of gathering data to demonstrate impact and return on investment both in terms of health and life skills.
- One pound spent upstream on physical education provides an eight to tenfold saving downstream to the NHS and health and social care, and a one in 15 return in terms of mental health and wellbeing. These figures are available here - Health matters: Prevention - a life course approach - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)
- The importance of place, and how local outdoor education provision helps meets Aberdeenshire's carbon budget as well as include young people in the stewardship of the local natural environment. The importance of the private and wider philanthropic sector partnerships in making the financial and business case.

Nick March then brought the discussion to a close, as well as outlined a number of private sector investment models. Key points included:

- Private sector capacity is important to the delivery of the outdoor residential bill.

- Private sector organisations are also having to seek outside investment and use creative funding models to support young people's residentials that may be a loss leading part of their business model.
- Some third sector organisations – for example the Scouts and Outward Bound – have been more successful than others in raising outside finance, however there is only a limited pot to go around. Ultimately it is the outdoor education sector's building stock that will determine its long-term success or failure.

Agenda item 3

Group Discussion

Following the presentations the group reflected on the contributions of the speakers and the wider investment environment. Key points included:

- The cost/benefit ratio of investment in outdoor education for health and wellbeing downstream has likely improved since it was last considered.
- The need for evaluation to support the outdoor education sector to present itself as a net financial benefit, rather than a necessary cost.
- The importance of demonstrating an academic benefit to outdoor education as a valuable part of the curriculum alongside outdoor learning.
- That outdoor residentials must be high quality if they are to deliver valuable outcomes and this must be built into any pricing model as part of the residential bill to avoid a race to the bottom.

Agenda item 4

Closing and next meeting date

Liz Smith MSP brought the meeting to a close, thanking speakers and members for their participation and Scouts Scotland for facilitating. It was agreed to decide the next meeting date by email and for this announcement to follow soon