

Education and Culture Committee

Outdoor Learning

Submission from Scottish Outdoor Education Centres

1. The benefits, for pupils and others, of outdoor learning;

1.1 SOEC believe that benefits arising from outdoor learning are many and varied and relate to children and young people as well as teachers, groups leaders and parents. Benefits should be evidence-based. Ours comes from various sources.

1.2 Following collaboration with the Centre for Confidence and Well-being, we surveyed young people attending residential programmes and the findings were that were able to contribute to the development of confidence and particularly the development of positive mind-set and optimism. The latter is important when research suggests some young Scots have a negative view of their future.

1.3 This was a small study but the findings on confidence were corroborated by a Social Return on Investment Analysis (SROI) of our work. An SROI determines a financial value, expressed as a ratio, for the social and environmental benefits from participating in an SOEC programmes. It determined a value of 1:11 such that one pound spent at SOEC results in over £11 of social and environmental benefits.

1.4 Apart from confidence, the SROI also looked at the way SOEC experiences trigger changes in behaviour away from those that impeded personal and social development. For example, of three young people from one class, two had restricted their diets and one was self-elective mute in school. During their 5-day residential, two started eating a wide range of food types and the third started talking to their staff and singing in the shower. Interestingly, one who had restricted their diet was described as not displaying behaviour sufficient to warrant additional support needs. The other had been seeing different dieticians for 6 years with no noticeable improvement. Also, the self-elective mute had been seeing psychologists for 6 years previously with no noticeable improvement.

1.5 These young people along with over 600 other P6 pupils were participating in a bespoke programme that focussed on three strands: confidence, rivers and health. In the survey of teachers' views on the quality of the learning outcomes, these were scored at 100%, 88% and 92% respectively. There were also ancillary benefits for teachers who welcomed, post residential, that pupils were happily engaging in cooperative working; something they had resisted prior to the residential.

1.6 Teachers on other programmes comment on various benefits including the immersive quality of the residential (as opposed to continuous multi-tasking at school) and refer to valuing being able to spend time as reflective practitioners and in assessing young people, and when looking at this with Learning Communities during e.g. the SOEC Transition Programme, its facilitation of moderation. Some value the opportunity to involve young people in outdoor learning without the heavy additional paperwork required of some experiences.

1.7 Teachers also benefit when engaged in Outdoor Learning CPD at a residential Centre since they are able to consider outdoor learning in context, over a period of time again supporting reflective learning. It may also benefit teaching more broadly since many teachers attending residentials do not see themselves as strong advocates of outdoor learning – CPD at Centres creates opportunities to reach more than “the usual suspects.” Others identify the importance of their relationship with pupils such as the Secondary teacher responsible for primary/secondary transition who said,

“This residential has been fantastic. In five days, I have developed a rapport with the pupils that would have taken me 3 months in school.”

1.8 SOEC also believe that specialist groups benefit such as the RNIB or the Haemophilia Society who wish children to engage in challenging activities without risk of injury. They experience health and well-being benefits not only from being in the outdoors but from engaging in activities to which they are usually excluded; access made possible through our specialist trained outdoor tutors.

1.9 The recognition of benefits extends to other specialist interests. For example Mr Gary McEwan, Chief Executive of Enterprise North East Trust, who regularly bring young entrepreneurs to our Centres said of SOEC,

“You are on the right tracks I'm sure. I'm involved in number of things at the moment and there is a big shift happening in education and for the better. The shift is towards employability rather than straightforward academic education and I believe SOEC provides many solutions to the gaps that education finds difficult to plug. Society more than ever requires young people to innovate and create new things on a bedrock of understanding social, economic and environmental issues... nobody could disagree that the economy needs young people to experience what you do there if they are to guide us out of the mess we are leaving them behind.”

1.10 We might also mention the benefits to parents of residential experiences. This is perhaps best exemplified in the letter from a parent attached in Annex 1 below. Research by Fiona Wood (‘Natural Design and Outdoor learning: An Exploratory Case Study at Scottish Outdoor Education Centres, 2011) suggests that contrary to the trend toward children spending more time indoors in sedentary computer and TV related activities, children actually want to spend more time in the outdoors. SOEC believe that parents welcome this where children are outdoors in safe places with people they trust, as at outdoor centres.

1.11 The benefits may be seen to contribute to the outcomes sought in both GIRFEC and Curriculum for Excellence. The residential experience may benefit achievement and attainment. Residential outdoor learning not only contributes to life skill development, it supports learning in schools e.g. social science, health and well-being, literacy and numeracy, physics, chemistry, biology, heritage, culture and society (LTS 2010). This breadth is outlined in the accompanying document ‘**The Need For and Future of Residential Outdoor Learning in Scotland**’ from the Association of Heads of Outdoor Education Centres which was presented to the Government last year

1.12 SOEC see the residential outdoor learning experience resulting in many benefits for children and young people. They benefit the group as well as individuals within the groups. They may benefit in different ways; sometimes giving rise to multiple benefits simultaneously. Given this, SOEC takes a positive approach to undertaking research and acknowledges the need for further research. Nevertheless, the evidence suggests strongly that the residential experience and outdoor learning combine to create a powerful pedagogy and for the thousands of young people who participate every year, as well as their parents, teachers and group leaders, the benefits of these are clearly apparent.

2. The extent to which all schools across Scotland are consistently implementing outdoor learning approaches and realising associated benefits;

2.1 The defining term when considering implementation would appear to be diversity. There is a lot of outdoor learning taking place. Some of it is excellent but it can often appear variable in quality, *ad hoc* and somewhat confused.

2.2 SOEC believe there is still a pressing need for outdoor learning to be seen in a more strategic context. Some individual outdoor learning interventions may be good but they would be more effective if there was a greater emphasis on pathways with continuity and progression between years, between Primary and Secondary schools and with more collaborative work between partners. Children and young people need to experience different types of outdoor learning regularly and frequently. Those who start in woodland nurseries, make use of school grounds, progress to local green spaces and participate in groups such as Scouts and Guides, then attend residential in Primary and Secondary before undertaking expeditions in Scotland and abroad, would be very different young people from those leaving schools today. But this fuller progression is important as the trend toward spending less time in the outdoors is clear... ***“in an increasingly protective society, outdoor experiences have become limited to time in gardens, schools grounds and less frequently, the local community.”*** F. Wood *ibid*

2.3 We are some way off this goal. Those who attend a residential are considered lucky – for many pupils it just does not happen. These pathways need not be prescriptive but more work is needed to ensure these pathways are developed. In this way, our young people would develop the confidence, skills and abilities that they will need to perform in a rapidly changing world.

3. How any barriers to increasing and improving the provision of outdoor learning are being addressed;

3.1 There is a need for a national vision for outdoor learning in Scotland. The **products** (outdoor learning initiatives, programmes projects etc.) are many but the **process** is yet to be developed. That process is about engendering partnership working. It is about unleashing the resources that are already available to us.

3.2 There is a need for greater cohesion among those in the outdoor learning sector. This arises in part by creating the conditions in Scottish education for Third Sector providers and other to play a legitimate role. In spite of 2 Government strategic advisory groups in recent years, we are not there yet.

3.3 There has been a great deal of effort to promote outdoor learning in recent years. In the report of the last Outdoor Learning Strategic Advisory Group in May 2010, the then Minister for Schools and Skills stated,

“Progressive outdoor learning experiences are best delivered through a combination of school-based outdoor learning and residential programmes.”

3.4 It is therefore surprising that beyond this statement of recognition (and possible intent) residential providers, who are delivering the lion's share of outdoor learning, have received relatively little support. As a result, many feel they have been marginalised and, following the economic downturn, vulnerable.

3.5 Possibly the outdoor sector has not represented itself well. It suffers from being highly fragmented. But it is unfair to be too scathing about people who are trying to deliver innovative outdoor learning in a complex financial and political environment. For many years they have been asked to compete for scarce resource which, while understandable in some respects, does not foster positive cohesion. The resulting uncertainty as to its potential and confusion as to who are best placed to provide it is both internal and project outward.

3.6 Some projects have been very expensive with little return in terms of benefits to young people. Others are doing great work and struggle on against a very uneven playing field. Unless we acknowledge failure, we add to the confusion. When operating within a mixed economy of providers, it would be beneficial for all to be operating on a level playing field. Unfortunately this is not the case. Crucially going forward, this tends *inter alia* to undermine the potential for partnership working. However the financial checks are largely in place – parents can take only so much – but when meeting health and safety obligations, food standards, delivering high quality educational and youth services etc., is it appropriate to expect this constantly on the cheap?

3.7 If we consider the prospectuses of many independent sector schools, outdoor learning is a stand-out feature of their school experience. It is promoted to parents because they know it gives their pupils the edge in their studies and in life. The point here is that this emphasis has not diminished over the decades – far from it. Conversely in the state sector, outdoor learning lacks confidence in its contribution and is uncertain of its permanence.

3.8 For these reasons, SOEC respectfully requests of the Education and Culture Committee, consider how they can contribute to the creation of a national vision for outdoor learning; one that is widely shared by teachers, decision-makers, parents, philanthropists and the vast number of charities and organisations that currently deliver outdoor learning. Outdoor learning in Scotland would benefit enormously from conviction and commitment and that should start at the top. Is the Education

and Culture Committee in a position to help bring this about? Is it possible for the Committee to maintain a regular interest in outdoor learning?

3.9 There is a need for evidence and examples of effective partnership working and the Committee might find ways to promote this and continue to press for their development. There have been considerable efforts in outdoor learning in recent years most of which is best described as joined-up government. In the light of the Christie Commission and other documents (the Enabling State of the Carnegie Trust) it is important to now shift the emphasis to partnerships that genuinely involved Third Sector organisations.

4. How Curriculum for Excellence will affect the provision of outdoor learning;

4.1 The issue is more about what Outdoor Learning can do to deliver Curriculum for Excellence – which is obviously a lot. I would ask Members of the Education and Culture Committee to consider the attached document from AHOEC. There is essentially a huge resource in Scotland of intelligent, creative and motivated groups, individuals, charities and social enterprises that can and do deliver high quality outdoor experiences. They wish only to find effective ways to interconnect and collaborate with the formal education sector to create professional partnerships.

4.2 SEOEC has clear objectives which reflect the outcomes sought in Curriculum for Excellence, to work with young people to develop their:

- confidence,
- ability to make decisions in the face of complex and daunting challenges;
- motivation and hence be more successful learners;
- positive attitude toward problem solving;
- resilience, tenacity and determination; as well as their...
- adaptability;
- understanding of risk, risk assessment and risk management;
- creativity both initiating and being receptive to innovation;
- knowledge and appreciation of healthier and more active lifestyles;
- ability to reflect on their own potential and contribution to society;
- appreciation of others, their place, contribution and potential in the world; and hence relating to responsible citizenship;
- team work and strong communication skills; as well as...
- leadership qualities and ability to delegate; hence effective contributors.

4.2 In her research, Fiona Wood identifies qualities, traits, values and habits of mind which are strong contenders for outdoor learning at SOEC, which we intend to develop more. These include:

Ecology	Empathy
Collaboration	Negotiation/Mediation
Literacy (Ecological)	Imagination
Giving and Taking Feedback	Global Awareness
Body Awareness	Resilience
Creativity and Will-power	Relaxation

5. Whether current levels of resource for outdoor learning are adequate.

5.1 Arguably the crucible of industrialisation and city living has produced a rich and diverse range of environmental approaches and outdoor learning types and styles in Scotland. Over many decades we have seen a powerful surge of creative and innovative approaches to outdoor learning, many of them originating from and developed by Third Sector organisations.

5.2 It is important to create a political and financial landscape in which the contribution of the Third Sector and its innovative capacity can thrive. Conversely we must not allow a wider environment to be created which stifles this innovative capacity, nor sees good ideas taken over by organisations (public sector organisations) that cannot sustain such work or generate new ideas. Perhaps the question to consider is whether the current levels of resource are going to the right people? Certainly there are many in the Third Sector who recall the distribution of millions of New Opportunity Fund monies at best as a mistake that should never be repeated.

5.3 However, the issue of resource should be considered in the context of parents who are currently funding by far the most outdoor learning that is taking place today. SOEC attend many school talks and recognise that parents value highly the residential experience for their children. For the most part, parents are paying for the lot: for the food, the accommodation, the tuition, and the travel. But prices are increasing and some parents are finding it difficult to fund the experience particularly when they have more than one child. It also impacts on those in the most disadvantaged areas. This is particularly significant as the residential outdoor experience can do a great deal to reduce the gap for such children. Teachers are resourceful in fund raising to support those who cannot afford the experience but one teacher has described increasingly difficulty in securing funding and that where they had previously gone to one source, they must now go to 3 or 4.

5.4 It is for these reasons as part of this submission, SOEC respectfully requests that the Education and Culture Committee give consideration to the creation of a mechanism that supports parents and reduces some of the financial pressure that is upon them. Given that the outcomes relate specifically to those sought by the Government, is there a case for some measure of Government support? Given the potential for outdoor learning and the residential experience to make a significant contribution to education, youth, employment and other Government policies, is it not best value to direct some money to securing and extending these experience for children and young people?

6. Progress being made by Education Scotland on the Learning for Sustainability recommendations.

6.1 SOEC can draw on Board Members and a staff team with many years of study and involvement in Sustainability. The standard integrated model of sustainable development features in our Business Plan (see Annex 2) and in some respects we see our work in the context of sustainability practitioners. The situation is urgent but in our opinion, progress has been slow and needs to be speeded up.

6.2 There was some good work by local authorities in the 1990s, developing themes of sustainability across their functions and crucially promoting the development of partnership working to bring projects to life. This worked benefitted from theoretical underpinnings such as Agenda 21 thinking. Unfortunately this has all waned. There currently seems to be little widespread understanding in local authorities of partnership working or the benefits to them of partnership working. Local authorities seem to be focussed on procurement and transport while central Government looks to change behaviour through fiscal mechanisms.

6.3 However, Sustainability is not only about product; it is also about process. Just as it is about RETs, hydrogen fuel cells and taxing carbon intensive behaviour, so too it is also about engaging people, partnership working and developing young people to be able to make wise choices about RETs, fuel cells etc.

6.4 Outdoor learning can contribute significantly to the Sustainability agenda. For example, SOEC see their work in the context of enabling young people to develop the skills, knowledge and experiences they'll need in their future. Our start point is that which is good for children and young people. We are solution oriented and beyond merely focussing on the problems.

6.5 For example, many adults hate change and invariably see change as a threat. We resist changes in our working practices; we ignore pleas to change our lifestyles (e.g. to have less impact on the environment.) We then go to considerable lengths to encourage young people to see the world as we see it. But when we encourage young people to fear change; to see only the threats of change and not the opportunities, we put their ability to survive and thrive in jeopardy.

6.6 Residential outdoor learning addresses this. It develops a young persons' self-perception, so they realise that they can do things that they had previously not thought possible. It develops in young people a range of essential life skills – confidence, citizenship, independence and resilience. This helps make them receptive to the opportunities of change and new opportunities. This is also taking place through e.g. Curriculum for Excellence but if we are to speed up or enhance this work, we have to promote it, and those educators, such as those in residential outdoor learning, who deliver it.

6.7 Residential outdoor learning represents a considerable resource ready to assist Education Scotland and support teachers and compliment the work in schools.

Dear Scottish Outdoor Education Centres,

I am writing to thank SOEC for the fantastic experience you offer to the children who come to your centres.

My eldest daughter, Rebekah, has always been quite a shy, introverted child. She finds it hard to pluck up the courage to try new things, especially when she is being watched. She first got the chance to come to one of your centres two years ago when her school arranged for her P4 class... to stay at Broomlee. Rebekah was very nervous about going but we felt it would be a good experience for her. And we were right. As a result of the activities she got to try and the encouragement from your excellent staff Rebekah returned home brimming with confidence. She had managed to ring the bell at the top of the tree climb and had got to do the flying fox.

This increased confidence has remained and has had an impact in all areas of her life, especially at school. She takes full part in school activities, such as class assemblies and school plays, and can make presentations to her class in a confident manner.

Rebekah went to your Belmont centre last year, again with her class. Again she came home brimming with confidence. Since then she has taken part in an Artsnet performance project... and represented her school with the Chess and Football teams. These are all things I don't believe she could have done without the boost to her confidence and self esteem that her stays at your Centres have given her.

So please pass on my thanks to all your staff for the hard work they put in to providing these amazing experiences for the children and let them know that they really do make a difference. I hope that SOEC is around for a long time to come. The service you provide is unique and of such a benefit to the children who are lucky enough to spend time with you. The range of activities you offer and the impact these can have on young children is amazing.

Yours,

Mrs EG

