

Prepared and submitted by Stephanie Price : Chair Wales Council for Outdoor Learning (WCfOL) 19/01/24 on behalf of Council Partners and Members.

Wales Council for Outdoor Learning (WCfOL)

Response to request for additional information regarding residential Outdoor Education Bill Wales.

The responses below have been prepared in consultation with partners and members of the Wales Council for Outdoor Learning. Your questions prompted a diverse and interesting discussion which highlighted the breadth of experience that WCfOL has in relation to this topic. A list of the organisations that were present and contributed to this response is at the end of this document.

In your letter you suggested that you had written previously to request additional information as part of the enquiry, but I did not receive any request and I have not been able to find any links to this consultation.

‘As you may be aware, we have recently launched a consultation on the Residential Outdoor Education (Wales) Bill. We wrote to you last week to make you aware of this general consultation’

If there is something further, you would like feedback on please contact me directly.

Should you require any further clarification or information please do not hesitate to get in touch again.

If residential outdoor education was free for all children, are there any other barriers that might prevent children attending?

Some of the other barriers are explored further in this document but the Council wanted to reinforce the following:

- Parental anxiety – this might be linked to a lack of knowledge and experience on the part of the parents, previous negative residential experiences, or cultural and religious preferences.
- Child/Young person anxiety – the above reasons might also apply to this group. Lack of experience of staying away from home, compounded by the interruption caused by the pandemic, has compounded this.
- Lack of 1-2-1 support required for young people with additional needs.
- Transport costs. Linked to the locality of available providers but even the cost of local journeys can be prohibitive.
- Cost of required clothing and equipment.
- Teacher confidence and willingness to take part.

The Bill doesn't cover the costs of clothing or footwear for children attending residential visits. Is a lack of appropriate clothing an issue you've come across? If so, what can be done and by who to address this?

The lack of appropriate clothing is certainly something that the members of WCfOL have encountered as being a barrier to taking part. It is not always the unavailability of specialist clothing, some children and young people do not have sufficient day to day clothing. The following points were raised in our discussion.

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- It is not necessarily the outdoor gear that is a barrier as centres can usually provide this and often carry a stock of basic items such as spare socks and warm clothing. It is important that centres communicate to parents what is available to provide reassurance.
- There are examples of schools and other organisations that encourage clothing to be donated and redistributed to children in need. Some of these are very local operations but WCfOL members are aware of larger organisations that support this.
- Recycling clothing , including outdoor clothing is an excellent way to support the circular economy and it would be good to raise awareness of what is already available and encourage more of these schemes. A centralised approach from Welsh Government could support this but also Welsh Local Government Agency (WLGA) could take a lead, involving schools and community groups.
- Some WCfOL members have sponsorship arrangements with outdoor clothing providers. Might there be a possibility of exploring such a relationship to underpin clothing costs for those most in need?
- Some schools already include the cost of a basic fleece and/or t-shirt in the package for children attending a residential. This both ensures that all children have at least the minimum of appropriate clothing but also 'levels the playing field' so all children have the same, and those that could afford 'branded' items are dressed the same as those that cannot. The cost of this clothing package for children in need could be covered by an additional payment to each school based on FSM criteria. Many schools already carry out fundraising activities to subsidise the costs of trips and visits for children.

Consultations on the draft Bill found that after financial constraints, the biggest barriers to children and young people accessing residential outdoor education is both children's and parent's anxiety and uncertainty. Is this something that you recognise and, if so, what could be done to address these concerns?

Yes, as already detailed in question 1, this is a very relevant issue and the number of young people experiencing anxiety has increased since the pandemic. The points below make suggestions as to what might be done to address this issue.

- Communication between the centre and the school pre visit is essential. Many outdoor centres already host in school meetings to provide information about their child's trip and teachers also share information with their pupils. When trying to build the confidence of parents, providing opportunities for them to visit the centre might help or if centres could create and share virtual tours of the site this could add to parents understanding of what their child will be experiencing.
- Collaborating with teachers from different settings to create virtual stories (Short films of the centre and activities that will take place) can support all young people but could also be particularly beneficial for young people with additional needs. Involving young people to create the virtual stories for future groups giving a peer to peer view.
- All WCfOL members felt that confidence should be built progressively and over several months in the lead up to a visit. Integrating outdoor learning experiences throughout the school day to get children used to being outdoors in a variety of weather conditions, socialising opportunities outdoors for children from different classes who may be together on the same trip, and generally practicing things that they are used to doing but in less familiar environments.

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- If the outdoor centre staff can visit the school as part of the preparation for the children , they could begin to build confidence and trust. If they were able to deliver ice breaker or team building sessions in school these would help to lay the foundations for positive interactions between the children once at the centre. Parents could also be invited in to meet the leaders and maybe experience some of the activities for themselves.
- Building confidence in staying away overnight progressively – 1 overnight initially. Some members have already seen schools booking fewer nights away per visit because they know that their children are not confident enough for longer stays.
- For the most anxious if day attendance could be facilitated and children enabled to go home each evening , this would allow children to be included and help them to see enjoy and benefit from the activities without the anxiety of the overnight stay.
- Funding for residential experiences where the parent can attend with the child. (Accepting there may be safeguarding mitigations required)
- Collaborative planning involving parents, supporting individual cultural needs.
- Integrating outdoor learning into classroom learning, a build-up of a regular outdoor experiences to expand horizons and comfort zone prior to visit. C5r ...

How can the needs of all children be met so they can fully participate in residential outdoor education? In particular, children with physical disabilities, mental health issues including anxiety, and those children with additional learning needs?

Some of the responses already given to the previous question also apply here but in addition:

- Using a progressive approach, phased introduction of overnight, support pre visit building confidence and trust through outdoor education in familiar environments.
- Funding should include the cost of additional support staff required to accompany children in the suggested groups.
- Sufficient funding available to allow for additional away days and nights to help build confidence prior to a full visit, for those most in need of support.
- Making physical outdoor sessions more accessible through training and appropriate adaptive equipment.
- Organisers must undertake a pre-visit to discuss children's individual needs and to work through what adaptations are already in place and identify additional requirements.
- Teaching staff should be supported to avoid making assumptions about what a child can and cannot take part in. Getting to know the outdoor centre and its staff is important and working together on a plan and appropriate risk assessment to facilitate the inclusion of all young people.
- Considerations need to be given to supporting the gender identity of young people.
- How will young people who are home educated access the provision?

There aren't any providers in Wales who offer specialised provision for children with more complex needs. If the Bill passes, this leaves a serious gap in ensuring equity of provision in Wales. What needs to be done, and by who, to ensure that all children regardless of their needs can access the offer of residential outdoor education in Wales?

The question of whether funding can be spent outside of Wales needs to be considered so that young people can access provision that is appropriate for them. In addition:

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- Funding could be provided to train teachers to offer bespoke 'residential' experiences for the young people in their care and making use of existing school facilities.
- Funding for centres to improve their facilities to make them more accessible.
- Fund and train a specialist team of outdoor/care professionals who could be deployed to support teachers to either run their own bespoke opportunities or alongside delivery in existing centres.
- There is often more flexibility in existing centres than people think, and good communication and pre-planning can overcome many challenges.

Are you confident that there is capacity within the residential outdoor education sector to accommodate the potential increase of all schools in Wales using their centres?

There is limited capacity in existing outdoor centres in Wales however there could be more flexible ways of using the facilities available and delivering the objectives of the bill:

- Could residential take place under canvas, in hostels, hotels or even holiday parks? Assuming that the objectives of a residential can only be met in an outdoor education centre might be shortsighted.
- There are centres in Wales which belong to both Welsh and English Local Authorities and a range of commercial providers. Full use could be made of all of these.
- Spreading the entitlement across an individual's school years would spread the demand.
- Better use could be made of the summer holidays to provide residential opportunities. This would require additional funding for teaching staff to support the visits but could also be linked with existing holiday programmes. (School Holiday Enrichment Programme)
- Voluntary sector organisation also have a good track record of delivering residential experiences would it be possible to contract with these to support summer programme.

The Bill provides that a course of residential outdoor education doesn't need to be provided on one visit. Do you think that this is the right approach, or would you like to see a requirement for the course to always be the full four nights and five days?

Agree that the entitlement could be spread over several visits, this flexible approach could also help to build confidence and reduce anxiety. The outdoor courses could also include day visit to the centre to help familiarise children with the environment.

What is your view on setting a minimum level of requirements for providers of residential outdoor education to meet before they provide visits for schools? What would be the benefits and drawbacks from your perspectives?

Some responses to Sam Rowlands' consultations raised concerns that the Bill would lead to a significant increase of funding to the sector which could result in new organisations forming to offer off the shelf courses so duties under the Bill can be met. What needs to be done, and by who, to ensure that high quality provision is provided?

- Centres already must comply with specific health and safety requirements, including the HSE Adventure Activities Licence where appropriate and most subscribe to the Learning Outside the Classroom Quality Badge which could be used as a measure of appropriate standards.

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- Ensuring that children and young people get an equal experience is important and one of the ways to achieve this is through the introduction of standards. A range of standards already exist which could be used to help judge appropriateness including the Visit Wales Adventure Activities Assurance Scheme.
- The Outdoor Education Advisors Panel provides guidance on the delivery of outdoor trips and visits for schools across Wales. Their input would be important to this discussion.
- Having decided on a minimum level of requirements for providers who will be responsible for checking this and would ESTYN or Local Authority Education departments have any remit to assess the quality of the educational experience?

The following organisations were represented at the WCfOL meeting where these responses were discussed:

Partners and Members:

Urdd Gobaith Cymru

Wildlife Trusts Wales

Field Studies Council

Antur Natur

Pembrokeshire Outdoor Schools

Partneriaeth

The Duke of Edinburgh's Award

UK Youth for Nature