



The Scottish Parliament  
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

## EDUCATION AND CULTURE COMMITTEE

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Dear Mike,

### Outdoor learning

At its meeting on 10 December the Committee held a one-off evidence session on the issue of outdoor learning, full details of which are available on our website: <http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/parliamentarybusiness/28862.aspx?r=8703&mode=pdf>

As you will see from the Official Report, a number of issues of concern were raised by witnesses throughout the meeting. I have summarised these issues below and would welcome your response to them. Please feel free to provide any other information that you feel would inform the Committee's consideration of this issue; the annexe to this letter sets out the broad areas that the Committee explored in evidence.

### Summary of issues arising

#### *Definitions and policy cohesiveness (OR columns 3108-10)*

- The Scottish Advisory Panel for Outdoor Education noted definitional differences around the terms "outdoor education" and "outdoor learning". It also considered that "There appears to be a 'disconnect' between policy as it is promoted at Government level and how it is implemented at local authority level."
- Christine Anderson from Beeslack Community High School noted that progression from nursery school to secondary school was a "massive task", while the Scottish Outdoor Education Centres commented on policy fragmentation: "We have had two strategic advisory groups in recent years, which have not really created the environment in which we can operate in a

strategic manner. You will have seen from the submissions [the written evidence provided to the committee] that there is still a lot of ad-hoc work going on, with one-off ideas being played out.”

#### *Teachers’ confidence and qualifications (cols. 3112 and 3116)*

- There was some difference of opinion about whether teachers were reluctant to participate outdoors because of risk concerns. The Scottish Advisory Panel for Outdoor Education considered this was still an issue for some teachers.
- Professor Higgins stated that “few schools have staff with specialist knowledge or qualifications” and said very few people become accredited teachers of outdoor education “because there is no standard teaching qualification within Scotland, so there is nothing for the GTCS to compare with”.

#### *Quality and consistency of provision (cols 3121-3123)*

- Witnesses acknowledged good practice in and commitment to outdoor learning but advised that quality and consistency should be improved—
  - The Scottish Advisory Panel for Outdoor Education said “The Scottish Government should also be concerned to have high-quality and coherently delivered outdoor learning or education, whatever that is, for our young people. Currently, that is an issue.”
  - Professor Higgins said “Despite political support, the absence of a coherent understanding of the nature of outdoor learning and its benefits by education authorities and teachers continues to limit quality ... of young people’s outdoor learning”. He added “What will help is more coherent and consistent policy from the Scottish Government, more from Education Scotland ... and perhaps a more determined push to make outdoor learning a recognisable and understandable part of the work of not just teachers in schools but all education professionals.”
  - The Scottish Outdoor Education Centres stated “There is an urgency around the need to focus on the quality side of things. There is a diversity, and we need to be able to project a more positive vision about the potential of outdoor learning in its widest sense. That is still the case, despite there being a couple of strategic advisory groups in recent years.”

#### *Resources (Cols. 3129– 3131)*

- Scottish Outdoor Education Centres (SOEC) claimed that attempts to discuss the financing of outdoor learning had been blocked—
  - “At the most recent meeting of the strategic advisory group, we had the opportunity to make recommendations on the financing of outdoor learning and even on the contribution of philanthropic support for it. I am embarrassed to say that that did not happen. I am a member of that group and I would like to have seen more emphasis on the financing of outdoor learning, but we did not broach it and, at one point, we were told that we could not do so because of sensitivities. I do not know what those sensitivities could be in the context of the Government’s strategic advisory group, but they blocked any discussion of the financing of outdoor learning. That is absolutely

crackers. We had an opportunity to look at the whole landscape of outdoor learning—all the providers, what they offer, the learning outcomes, the costs of what they do and how they could gear up—but we did not do that. I do not know how we can give strategic advice to ministers without knowing what is out there and how much it costs.”

- SOEC’s oral and written evidence suggested resources had been wasted—
  - “There have been some fairly profligate uses of money in the past, which many people would not like to happen again. We need transparency in how things are funded and some sort of cohesion and coming together about how we can best serve all our young people to get all these experiences.” (Col 3129)
  - “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 as a mistake that should never be repeated.”<sup>1</sup>
- Professor Higgins advised that “There must also be an appropriate supply of advisory staff in local authorities to advise schools properly so that they can spend the money that they have properly, even before we start to deal with schools’ budgets. For example, I could point to outdoor centres that are in essence activity holiday centres—there is no educational benefit that I can see in the work that they do ... I am talking about commercial providers that charge significant amounts and make a good profit.”
- The Scottish Advisory Panel for Outdoor Education said “...I think that the provision is in danger. The opportunities that existed for children in the past are definitely shrinking. There were 12 local authority-owned outdoor centres in Strathclyde, and there are now two, which is significant.”

*Scottish Government and Education Scotland Leadership (Cols. 3133– 3135)*

- When asked how Scottish Government, Education Scotland and the GTCS could push the agenda, witnesses responded as follows—
  - Professor Higgins: “I would love to hear this committee and our ministers say that outdoor learning is a priority and that we need to do it because it is about the nation.”
  - Scottish Outdoor Education Centres: “... it is a matter of bringing all those strands together again and asking, “Who is responsible for this? Who is going to take a lead on this?” ... we have been down this road before—we have sought to create a more strategic approach and it has not quite connected up. There are different ways of doing things and we should seek to do them in different ways but the key question is: who is responsible? ... Outdoor learning needs to be pulled together and co-ordinated;
  - Scottish Advisory Panel for Outdoor Education: “At the moment, Education Scotland is fairly well focused on outdoor learning, but the progression element has disappeared off the agenda a little bit. If we want to climb mountains and go to sea—if we see the value in that—

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<sup>1</sup> See page 54, paragraph 5.2 of its written evidence: [http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/S4\\_EducationandCultureCommittee/Meeting%20Papers/EC\\_Meeting\\_papers\\_20131210.pdf](http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/S4_EducationandCultureCommittee/Meeting%20Papers/EC_Meeting_papers_20131210.pdf)

that needs to be reinforced, perhaps with something added about the value of the residential experience. We have good communication with Education Scotland and work very closely with it, but we constantly have to remind it that there is another element involved. It is important that that should be done.”

- In his written evidence, Professor Higgins stated:
  - “Despite political support, the absence of a coherent understanding of the nature of outdoor learning and its benefits by education authorities and teachers continues to limit quality and quantity of young-people’s outdoor learning experiences. There remains no national policy, statutory requirements, regulatory mechanisms, formal teaching qualifications, nor quality assurance to encourage, establish and maintain standards of outdoor learning experiences. Whilst HMIE has reported on outdoor education where they have encountered it there is no expectation that they will do so and inspections of outdoor centres and other providers are very rare.”<sup>2</sup>

*Implementing Learning for Sustainability (col 3137)*

- Professor Higgins noted that the Scottish Government accepted the recommendations of the above report in March 2013 but that a subsequently-appointed implementation group would only be ready to start work in January 2014.

I look forward to your response.

Yours sincerely,

**STEWART MAXWELL MSP**  
**CONVENER**

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<sup>2</sup> See page 17 of his written evidence:  
[http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/S4\\_EducationandCultureCommittee/Meeting%20Papers/EC\\_Meeting\\_papers\\_20131210.pdf](http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/S4_EducationandCultureCommittee/Meeting%20Papers/EC_Meeting_papers_20131210.pdf)

## **Annexe**

In issuing invitations, the Committee noted that the following issues would form the basis of its discussions—

- The benefits, for pupils and others, of outdoor learning;
- The extent to which all schools across Scotland are consistently implementing outdoor learning approaches and realising associated benefits;
- How any barriers to increasing and improving the provision of outdoor learning are being addressed;
- How Curriculum for Excellence will affect the provision of outdoor learning;
- Whether current levels of resource for outdoor learning are adequate.
- Progress being made by Education Scotland on the Learning for Sustainability recommendations.