

Minutes

Cross-Party Group on Outdoor Education

2nd February 2023, 10:30am

Via Teams

MSPs in attendance:

- Liz Smith MSP
- Daniel Johnson MSP

Non-MSP Group Members in attendance:

- Peter Wilson, Ardentenny Centre
- Andrew Bradshaw, Scottish Advisory Panel for Outdoor Education (SAPOE)
- Lisa Dorstek, Scouts Scotland
- Samuel Minty, Head of School, Sgoil Dhalabroig, Uist
- Helen Gardyne, Head Teacher, Ormiston Primary School, Edinburgh
- Neil Baird, Scouts Scotland
- N. Wightwick, Blairvadach Outdoor Education Centre
- Phil Thompson, Outdoor Education
- Lee Musson, Rock UK
- Rob Bushby
- Hazel Wiseman, Ocean Youth Trust
- Toby Clark, John Muir Award
- Kevin Marsh, Craikhope Outdoor Centre
- Mike Harvey
- Freda Fallon, Outward Bound
- Nick March, The Association of Heads of Outdoor Education Centres (AHOEC)
- Mike Etherington, Field Studies Council
- Paul Bayton, SU Scotland
- Peter Moir, Duke of Edinburgh
- James Allan, Scottish Advisory Panel for Outdoor Education (SAPOE)
- Stuart Younie, Mountaineering Scotland
- Claire McIntosh, Scouts Scotland

Apologies

- Jackie Simpson, OutLET
- Beatrice Wishart MSP
- David Exeter, Outward Bound
- Mark Ruskell MSP
- Peter Higgins, Edinburgh University
- Jamie Miller, Scottish Outdoor Education Centres, SOEC
- Brian Whittle MSP

Agenda

1. Welcome by Liz Smith MSP, feedback re: Schools Residential Outdoor Education Scotland Bill.
2. Apologies and Introduction to Andrew Bradshaw, SAPOE
3. Presentations from SAPOE
4. Questions
5. Closing remarks, date and time of next meeting

Agenda Item 1

Welcome by Liz Smith MSP, feedback re: Schools Residential Outdoor Education Scotland Bill

Liz Smith MSP welcomed delegates and explained that the timing of the CPG on this occasion (10.30 to 11.30am) cuts across parliamentary time for MSP colleagues and may have an impact on who may be able to attend. Hope to hold next CPG meeting in person.

Update provided re: Schools Residential Outdoor Education Scotland Bill – Bill now has relevant parliamentary support of 36 members (18 required), thanks for evidence and support, must wait until 23rd February to find out whether the Scottish Government will take this on as a Bill or if Liz Smith MSP will be asked to produce it. The Bill is ready to start its parliamentary process.

Agenda Item 2

Apologies and Introduction to Andrew Bradshaw, SAPOE

Liz Smith MSP asked delegates to provide Claire McIntosh at Scouts Scotland with further updates of apologies or changes. (See apologies above)

Liz Smith MSP welcomed presenters: Andrew Bradshaw, Secretary, SAPOE and guests Samuel Minty, Head of School at Sgoil Dhalabroig in Uist and Helen Gardyne, Head Teacher at Ormiston Primary School, Edinburgh.

Agenda item 3

Presentations from SAPOE

Please note: Abbreviated slides from SAPOE presentations attached

Introduction to SAPOE - Andrew Bradshaw, Secretary, SAPOE

Andrew: As a brief overview I'm giving an intro to SAPOE and a quick update. Then I will share presentations which include input through SAPOE membership evidence, split into 3 parts: good practice, challenges and suggestions. I'll then speak about case studies - thanks to Sam and Helen for providing these today.

SAPOE are willing to support case studies on-going, so as to encompass the breadth of experiences of urban as well as rural, secondary as well as primary schools.

SAPOE believes in progression, that spectrum of Outdoor Learning – on-site, local, day and Residential - and this is at the heart of SAPOE's work. Membership is primarily local authorities – as deliverers and users of services – and they also have strong partnerships with centres, universities, independent sector and governing bodies.

SAPOE also looks after Going Out There, which is a safety management framework and that's key to supporting schools, giving them confidence, to deliver safe practice.

SAPOE has been looking at its resilience as an organisation and is looking at a paid role, engaging with partners, driving Outdoor Learning and looking at making sure national debate is well informed. James Allan is the new CEO of SAPOE.

James: It's an exciting but challenging time for Outdoor Learning. Next few months and years is going to be difficult. SAPOE is well placed to collaborate with other organisations to help move this forward – put outdoor learning and physical education together and recognise the huge benefit for Scottish society. I'm 3 weeks in but am already making good connections and having good conversations, particularly in the world of sport. I was formerly CEO of Royal Yachting Scotland – and prior to that was a lead manager at Perth & Kinross Council, focusing on CLD and youth work, before that was professionally employed by Scouts Association. Happy to connect and chat with other members.

Andrew: Will circulate James's details in case anyone wants to have a chat direct on their area of interest.

Membership feedback

At the SAPOE event in Nov/Dec we wanted to look at good practice first. Remembering that local authorities all have different contexts, but I've addressed this in themes.

Strategy

First off, strategy – one LA had a strong strategy, key expectations and outdoor learning was integral to school improvement plan, expectation that outdoor learning. Another LA had outdoor learning with sustainability integral, didn't feel vulnerable as progression was built in across the full spectrum.

One thing that's emerging is Outdoor Learning's contribution to key priorities – addressing care experience, school attendance, transitions, holiday programmes, Ukrainian families, additional learning needs – AHOEC might be able to give evidence on this in another meeting – England/Somerset has worked to get better outcomes for Care Experienced young people – good evidence and also saved money as well as contributed to better outcomes.

Workforce and training - SAPOE deliver online courses, delivered with minimum national funding and a great example of accessible – people could access this for baseline knowledge – it's about need and building capacity as well.

Another LA talked about high supervision – using and recognising the importance of volunteering – another LA has a school-to-school approach where they share information.

Partnerships were a big theme, third sector providers are critical to schools delivering this – building residential capacity. Partnerships also allowed access to funding, local authorities working with third sector to deliver this.

One thing local authorities are focused on is supporting attendance in Residential – this is shifting from Covid to Cost of Living and reducing the cost of the school day.

One local authority highlighted the benefits of Community Benefits Schemes. Outdoor centres (local companies procurement contributing towards residential – one LA said this raised £10k since mid-October). In another LA, fundraising is part of the curriculum.

One feedback was how centres are working with schools – presentations from providers Recognised parents and children anxiety after covid, this needs addressing – some staff providing input at child planning meetings, and other types of input (working with centres) to reassure families

Who attends/who doesn't (and why) – this tells an LA whether systems are working.

Another LA mentioned about centres matching schools on transport needs, sharing coaches and reducing costs here (more complicated).

Curriculum school improvement – examples linking into sport and physical activity – ie. swimming, pools to open water, safety training, accreditation – thinking about how a residential programme fits into a school's curriculum. If you want to improve residential, it's the LA's responsibility and the school's responsibility to think about what they want out of this, relationships integral.

An LA developing a toolkit to baseline Outdoor Education and allow us to measure going forward.

There's also an element of sharing best practice.

Funding - Core centres/direct (local) delivery (extended days) and accessing wide accounts of funding, additional needs – lots of good practice around the country on the performance of outdoor learning. Good to tie that up and see that in action.

Challenges

Three themes – what are those challenges and was it common or just an individual experience.

There are key things – consistency across Scotland, for example access to high quality support and training, and this needs to reflect the needs of local needs of local authorities and schools as well.

The instability of budgets – thinking longer term, will they have enough money, will they have a team to deliver that? That's challenging for LAs, we know that, but some are working hard at that.

Workforce training – skills and knowledge gaps – staff shortages, right across instructor sectors (e.g. outdoor centres) – food, cleaning, domestic side as well, and accessibility to training across geography.

Important that Outdoor Learning is not a subject, but rather a context/approach for learning and through smart curriculum planning, it's a medium for work across the school, and that will come through training as well. Whole schools, we still see that heroic leadership of Outdoor Learning, and I wonder if that person moves, will we still see that high quality of Outdoor Learning – as it can often be linked to one person. Many schools are taking on generic school improvement patterns which works well, improving training, continuous improvement.

Reducing the costs of the school day – we're worried about equity, and whether that reduces the offer.

Constant around attendance on residential, are we monitoring this? Not just around equity but also around anxiety.

Some schools are thinking of reducing the length of activities (nights stays) or changing the time to year

Cost of transport – heavy feedback from colleagues, inconsistency of costs, which can vary widely Inspections were welcomed, but what is the next step? Identifying good practice but where that's working, where it's not working so well?

Capacity and workload – the ability to address some of these challenges, within the context of rising demand and accessibility to high quality support.

Main challenges and these were common across

Q – Liz Smith MSP - Have you had dialogue with HMIE about whether this will be inspected when they look at the school?

A – Andrew Bradshaw, SAPOE – SAPOE met HMIE and had a positive meeting, we offered support to continue engagement about how this may work in the future – further engagement would be welcome.

Suggestions and next steps

All the partners, groups, stakeholders having an over-arching national coming together – so we are all working in the same direction, as part of learning for sustainability – SAPOE keen to take part/ lead this. This would include discussions around workforce training, very focused on initial teacher education so those fundamentals are in there

Listen to young people, they're saying they want to be outdoors, it's where they learn best – and staff are saying the same.

Inspection - helps to build a greater profile of learning for sustainability.

Learning for sustainability – reducing the cost of the school days

Transport – can we have discussions around how the YP free transport scheme could facilitate them getting to residential experiences

Meaningful community and life research that will look at how we measure impact, with universities too.

SAPOE willing to continue with online training, models developed with good take up.

Sam's case study

Sgoil Dhalabroig, South Uist

Background of the school – small, less than 100 pupils, Gaelic medium school, 75:25 split between speakers and learners. 90% of pupils need to travel 2+ miles to get to school which also impacts engagement and transport and therefore after school activities, etc

Location dealing with depopulation – highest depopulation in Western Isles. Catchment area has extremely high levels of fuel poverty, pre-cost of living crisis – which also affects the community, parents and what they do at the schools.

Heritage

Gaelic heritage (crofting and sailing) and strong culture in 50s/60s of outdoor learning. This was tied to an individual and when they person left, if disappeared. But parents/ grandparents were interested in reviving this.

Crofting, sailing, water activities, or post-historical events like the mass emigration to Canada, that really shapes how we teach outdoor learning and how we embed it into the curriculum.

Community

Biggest strength is the community and involving them in lessons, extra-curricular activities, training opportunities, it's about making it sustainable for future generations – for example training parents and staff from 5 schools to kayak so young people can access it – planting nearly 2k trees in school

grounds (500/yr), and that will give another activity that we can offer to pupils in future years. Inter-generational activities in partnership with third sector orgs –for example, 2 e-Trikes delivered recently and excited to start this intergenerational outdoor education project.

Partnering with local businesses, church groups and mainland schools to deliver outdoor learning. This also feeds into developing the young workforce, school improvement projects and the Gaelic strategy which is becoming more useful to us on how we structure that within the curriculum.

Wellbeing

Especially throughout covid, on the return to school, there was an opportunity to redesign activities to make the most out of outdoor learning e.g. art lesson on local beach. Like Andrew mentioned this is how children are learning best, it really motivates them. It's also made us visible to the community and encouraged the community to engage with our learners.

Having an alternative to following an academic-only route to your education is good for many pupils who want to stay on the island and fish or croft. Forcing these young people to sit at a desk isn't working for them, they want to learn outdoors.

Environment

Using our local environment to our advantage, hills, lochs, maccha, beach and developing playgrounds e.g. a wild area which is essentially an abandoned piece of land which is used for imaginative play. Looking at climate change, wildlife and linking to science and literacy. So, learning outdoors is not a stand-alone event.

Key steps

Key is Outdoor Learning as an approach, and it's linked to community development. It's not just about the big-ticket items, but it's much more the shift in the mindset of staff and parents which allows us to embrace the outdoors. We see happier, more resilient, motivated young people who want to come to school to learn. We see happier students more willing to come to school and happy in the place they live.

This year we have a city residential planned.

With policy we really changed our curriculum and have looked at how we plan for the outdoors and the big change is involving the pupils – they look at the school improvement plan, they have their own school improvement plan, and we get feedback through surveys etc. This has been very successful, and we've shared this with other schools in the Western Isles that want to replicate it but it doesn't always work (comes back to key context areas, especially our community)

SAPOE has given staff the confidence to go outdoors, look at the risks and understand that this can be embedded across the curriculum, which makes it more manageable.

We changed our approach to risk – with the support of their Outdoor Education Officer, they've changed to a risk benefit analysis and now are getting young people to risk assess their activities and share their learning even more.

We've thought about having our own residentials, purely due to things like transport – and there's no reason they need to go to the mainland for things like kayaking. This year we're looking at a city residential, to experience things mainland children might take for granted and the kids are excited about that, some have never been on a double decker bus.

Next step for outdoor learning might be thinking that outdoors isn't just wild and nature, it can be urban as well.

Training our teachers and support staff to be Outdoor Heroes – important to spread this across the staff to make it sustainable in case that champion leaves.

Work with third sector/private nurseries so they can join together to share burdens, costs, difficulties, around these kind of things.

Challenges

Change in the attitudes across the education department in local government

We were keen to have a Pump Track – people were adverse to it – but never asked the LA for any funding, all equipment has been funded ourselves, but continually come up against the bureaucracy of “you can’t have this, nobody else has it”. Changed how we approach risk to be more solutions focus.

Teacher workload and delivering the breadth of the curriculum – feel there are wide goalposts for inspections – worry that all this work goes into outdoor education, but we might not even be inspected on this, which adds stress to staff.

Climate change is affecting us, flooding for example is limiting amount of time they get outside – this includes a change in the weather, with it raining more, we can’t get outside as much.

Transportation – to get to a residential centre means a bus needs to get on a ferry. A “2-day trip” might take us 4 days.

Sustainability across stakeholders and staff to ensure we can keep offering this good stuff in future.

Helen’ story

Ormiston Primary School, Edinburgh

Ormiston is school in East Lothian, fairly rural but also close to Edinburgh. There are 250 children in the school ranging from 3-12 years old.

Curriculum rationale is about challenging children to give them high expectations and opportunities. We use Outdoor Education to push through giving leadership opportunities and giving young people new opportunities they wouldn’t have elsewhere.

Relationships are key – we encourage kids to learn and develop leadership skills in “cross groups”, from primary 1 to 7. When this was taken away due to covid we felt this was the biggest issue to our school culture. Because they couldn’t mix, we started to see a decline in children’s resilience and our community feel.

Returning from covid we quickly got outdoor learning moving again and the difference has been phenomenal.

We have a leadership promise at the school. We use the “7 habits” programme, which is ideal for children to develop themselves as a leader – this helps build in the common language of leadership skills. The aim is to encourage young people to develop themselves as a leader, to develop team building skills, and to nurture a healthy mind and body, with time to refresh and regenerate.

Activities – we offer core experiences in the building, and they link with the outdoor education team in E Lothian P4-7 kids get a range of experiences that take them out of their comfort zone and give them an opportunity to develop resilience – give them an opportunity to experience situations where they can practice this.

We take kids on Residential from P3-P7 – P3 goes 1 night to a dormitory base, quite local, where kids do teambuilding and problem-solving activities. This has no cost to parents – so that every child's first camp experience has no financial cost.

P4 Winton Castle owner wants to foster links with schools, so we take the children camping there, we cook on fire, £2 covers our costs and we walk there.

P5 go to Activity centre – we find effective (before P7 when kids went away for a whole week it's a lot) but this structured programme is built up little by little now so they're more likely to attend.

P6 Taking kids camping has a strong leadership focus, building them up to be the senior leaders in the school when they go up to P7.

P7 kids go up to Benmore, strong experience because of the quality of the instructors, willingness to engage in the language of the school and integrate this – also we like not being in a man-made environment, in the natural world.

P6/7 can be leaders for P3/4 camps. Older kids apply and younger kids interview them – appointed leaders do not pay for the camp experience.

Developed a library of kit – sleeping bags, rucksacks, wellies, waterproofs, etc so we try to look at any barriers for young people taking part in activities from an afternoon in the woods to something bigger – we have an online kit bag where parents can let us know at any time if they need kit, supported by a parent council – so that we can take away as many barriers as possible

East Lothian has a trust, so this is promoted to parents who need support getting part of the camp paid for. We also give a long lead time to help people plan.

Within the school day we do Ricky's Challenges – one has an Outdoor Education focus – kids sign up for activities like tent building, fire lighting, bushcraft etc – so we identify leadership skills they will learn and core criteria to achieve. Some of the older kids lead these sessions and getting this back after covid has made a huge difference.

We try to get out in the community as much as we can, walking, running and cycling, around 3 times a week

We have a focus on things that have no costs – so that kids can think about things they can do themselves with their parents.

Nursery does fire lighting, have trips to the woods, they build up confidence going out and about.

The nursery kids are gung ho and will get themselves stuck into everything – we are now looking at recognising how skilled and confident kids are coming out of nursery.

Our kids do evaluation, looking at what skills they were expected to develop, they reflect and evaluate how they did and providing feedback on the experience.

We have a strong outdoor education team – and post covid more value has been placed on the Outdoor Education team, which previously may have been in line for cuts, but are now front and centre, focused on teaching other teachers the skills they need to deliver

Have taken part in programmes like the John Muir Award.

Have talked about how e-learners lead learners – as staff learn from professionals, the children also do – for sustainability, keep things moving forward.

We love cooking outdoors with the kids. By P7 the kids take on the outdoor cooking for the whole school.

Outdoor learning service – key has been having strong links with the health and safety officer in East Lothian, who has an attitude of let's see how we can do this rather than "no".

Cost of the school day - We have £65 to cover a lot - reading and maths resources, musical instruments, breakfasts and snacks, science equipment, playground equipment etc. With the rising

costs of delivering the core educational experience, we'll struggle to deliver this range. The reducing of the curriculum offering will have a real impact on schools as this is all we have to spend.

Agenda Item 4

Questions

Q – Liz Smith MSP - When it comes to school inspections, Helen, are HMIE impressed and interested in what you're doing?

A – Helen Gardyne, Head Teacher, Ormiston Primary - We were part of the thematic inspection – yes, its core leadership, its core programme for us. The slant of taking kids outside to do just Maths is not the full picture. It's about a high-quality experience, not just doing things outside.

Liz Smith MSP thinks HMIE is more and more interested in this particularly post-covid
I think the slant of taking kids outside to do their maths is not the thing – it's about high-quality experiences, rather than just being outside.

Q – James Allan, SAPOE - How can we share the benefits of outdoor learning to the wider audience?

A – Liz Smith MSP - There should be a national forum somewhere where we can share this evidence – the Residentials Bill is an opportunity to provide evidence on the record as part of the Bill (and perhaps we have recommendations of who would be asked to give evidence)

Andrew Bradshaw - we will liaise with the schools to share the information from the slides – as this is really important to share ideas.

SAPOE membership felt the overarching strategy/ approach of coming together as a community was beneficial and SAPOE would come together with others to lead on that. It was clear that initial teacher training was important, getting people ready for on-site and residentials, so that's a useful and good point.

Comment – Nick March, AHOEC - Curriculum for Excellence is 14 years old – with Education Scotland there was an Outdoor Learning Officer – you can see from the presentations that we've now worked out what to do – best case scenarios. We need that Officer back in Education Scotland to lead, collate and share best practice on this. Ian Menzies is amazing, he has so much to do with WTEM so he can't possibly do all the Outdoor Education too. So even though the Residential Bill is fantastic we want to get this across the breadth of Scotland. (Liz Smith and chat participants agree)

Q – Neil Baird, Head of Outdoors, Scouts Scotland - There was mention in both presentations about hitting barriers and taking a solution focused approach. Question is are the barriers there for other local authorities who aren't achieving to the same level? Are SAPOE seeing a continuum of outdoor learning in schools? That links to the Bill, if you get the provision how do you make sure that this funds the continuum rather than just one residential experience?

A – Andrew Bradshaw, SAPOE – This is a priority for SAPOE. One LA is developing a self-evaluation toolkit to help respond quickly to it and to evaluate. A lot of the information is anecdotal – we need to collect evidence that is purposeful. SAPOE are committed to viewing all the aspects of outdoor learning together as they complement each other. The thematic study looked at good examples, but we may also want to look at where we are and where's the baseline here nationally. We've in a leadership role nationally an over-arching plan to drive this forward. It's a work in progress and we definitely need to assess and baseline this or we will keep seeing pockets.

Comment – Nick March, AHOEC - We have seen the whole picture of the outdoor learning journey and would like to cover where the residentials are at in that journey, give some best practice. Residentials need to extend this journey. How do Residentials need to adapt to not be that “desert island” experience or one-off.

Agenda Item 5

Liz Smith MSP thanked presenters and organisers. Nick March from AHOEC offered to present on the subject of Residential using feedback from December 2022 AHOEC meeting with Heads of Outdoor Education Centres, with case studies, ideally in person. Liz Smith MSP suggested that the next CPG meeting be held in March. Minutes to be circulated w/c 6th February along with abbreviated slides from the SAPOE presentations and a proposed time and agenda for the next CPG on Outdoor Education.

Please save the date - 9th March at 1pm for our next CPG on Outdoor Education - in person if we can. Confirmation of the date, agenda and meeting details will follow soon.