The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Official Report

EDUCATION AND CULTURE COMMITTEE

Tuesday 10 December 2013

Session 4

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EDUCATION AND CULTURE COMMITTEE
32nd Meeting 2013, Session 4

CONVENER

*Stewart Maxwell (West Scotland) (SNP)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*George Adam (Paisley) (SNP)
*Clare Adamson (Central Scotland) (SNP)
*Jayne Baxter (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
*Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
*Joan McAlpine (South Scotland) (SNP)
*Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD)
*Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Christine Anderson (Beeslack Community High School)
Professor Peter Higgins (University of Edinburgh)
Nigel Marshall (Scottish Advisory Panel for Outdoor Education)
Dave Spence (Scottish Outdoor Education Centres)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Terry Shevlin

LOCATION

Committee Room 6

Scottish Parliament

Education and Culture Committee

Tuesday 10 December 2013

[The Convener *opened the meeting at 10:05*]

Decision on Taking Business in Private

The Convener (Stewart Maxwell): Good morning and welcome to the 32nd meeting in 2013 of the Education and Culture Committee. I remind everyone to ensure that all electronic devices and particularly mobile phones are switched off at all times, because they interfere with the broadcasting system.

Our first agenda item is a decision on whether to take in private agenda item 4, which is consideration of our work programme. Do members agree to take item 4 in private?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Outdoor Learning

10:05

The Convener: Our next item is a one-off evidence session on outdoor learning, which has been on our work programme for some time. This is the first time in the current session of Parliament that we have taken evidence on the subject. As members are aware, there has been a fair amount of interest in today's meeting. I thank everyone who submitted their views in writing to the committee in advance of the meeting.

I welcome Christine Anderson, from Beeslack community high school; Professor Peter Higgins, from the University of Edinburgh; Nigel Marshall, from the Scottish advisory panel for outdoor education; and Dave Spence, who represents the Scottish Outdoor Education Centres. Thank you all for coming along and giving your time to the committee. We will move straight to questions from members, as we have a lot of interest and a lot of areas to cover.

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Mr Marshall, in your written submission, you make the important point that there appear to be two terms with different definitions: "outdoor education" and "outdoor learning". You also say:

> "There appears to be a 'disconnect' between policy as it is promoted at Government level and how it is implemented at local authority level."

Will you elaborate on the problem about definitions and say where the disconnect has come from?

Nigel Marshall (Scottish Advisory Panel for Outdoor Education): To me, outdoor education is what we are all involved in delivering, whereas learning is the process by which we learn and is part of education. To call one part outdoor learning seems a bit silly, because it all takes place in the outdoors. Really, one thing leads on to the other. I do not see why we should try to differentiate between what happens in the local area of a school and what happens on a mountainside. To me, they are all part of the same thing—one is a progression from the other. That should happen naturally and appropriately, and in a way that is meaningful for the children and makes some sort of sense.

Professional colleagues can decide that the outdoor learning agenda, as defined by the Scottish Government, has been satisfied and then conveniently forget the other bit, which is outdoor education, and decide that it is not needed. That is a big concern to me. What a terrible thing if a young person's experience is confined to the local school grounds, local parks and green spaces and they never get to a mountain or to see the sea. For my entire life, I have been involved with ensuring

that young people get the whole package. The service that I deliver involves the local school grounds and green spaces, which is fantastic. I welcome the Scottish Government's work to ensure that that happens. Nobody in outdoor education, and certainly not on the Scottish advisory panel, has a bad word to say about that—we think that it is fantastic—but we are concerned about the bit where children move on from that and do adventurous activities, get into the mountains, experience boats on the sea, have residential experiences and do all the other things that, I think, the Scottish Government thought that it was implementing. That is the situation as I see it.

Liz Smith: The phrase "outdoor learning" is used substantially in curriculum for excellence and has been used in a Government initiative, so it is perhaps easier to define. Is the difficulty with the term "outdoor education" that it is harder to define and therefore harder to get people to buy into it in the same way?

Nigel Marshall: No—that is the one-word answer to that question.

For me, what happens in the process of outdoor education—if you want to use that term—is the same as what happens with outdoor learning, but different things are added to the pot, so there is added value. Different things happen with a residential experience or out on a sailing boat. When I am preparing to go out on a boat with a group of young children we look at what the weather is doing, what the state of the tide is, what clothing we need to wear and what food we need to take—all the things that we need to do to make the trip a success. A planning process is involved. We see which way the wind is blowing and then we decide where we are going in the boat. As we go out on the boat, we learn about the sea and the sun and the moon and how they affect the tide. We learn about how we need to protect ourselves from the wind and the weather. The children sail the boat; I do not sail the boat. A whole stack of added value goes in there.

On residentials, there are children who come to the centre that I manage who cannot use a fork and knife. It is horrible watching children trying to eat mince and tatties with their hands because they are living in a takeaway society these days. I am concerned about that element of it. We must address that.

The two concepts are of equal value. I am not trying to differentiate. One complements the other and each is important. I hope that those examples helped.

Liz Smith: Thank you. That was helpful. How do the other panellists think that we should address the issue, given that it is a major one?

Professor Peter Higgins (University of Edinburgh): Do you mean the definitional issue?

Liz Smith: The added-value concept. We are probably all agreed that outdoor education has added value. The concepts are not opposing; it is about added value.

We got substantial evidence and there seems to be a feeling that we are less certain, particularly when it comes to getting staff and volunteers to help with outdoor education. We certainly seem to be less comfortable with local authority commitment. What I am really trying to drive at is how we improve that.

Christine Anderson (Beeslack Community High School): From a schools point of view, it is about progression. You start off with maybe doing bits and pieces outdoors in nursery school. You will get to the stage where the youngsters have developed quite considerable skills and need to be put into more challenging situations. It is really important to try to get some cohesive system together where you have progression going through. That is a massive task, but it is the crux of this.

Dave Spence (Scottish Outdoor Education Centres): I think that the fragmentation starts at a higher level, too. On added value, we offer benefits in terms of health and wellbeing, education, youth policy and sport, but the picture is fragmented and there is never really the chance to come together as a cohesive whole.

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 that there is still a lot of ad-hoc work going on, with one-off ideas being played out.

As Christine Anderson said, we are seeking progression and interconnection to enable young people to have different types of outdoor learning regularly and frequently. That is the goal, but it has been elusive. While things are fragmented in that fashion it remains difficult for us to come together.

Liz Smith: Would you say that the problem has been with the process of discussing how we improve that, or are there serious barriers that are preventing policy from being driven forward? Is it a communication problem?

Dave Spence: We can learn from the efforts that have been made in the past and seek not to replicate the things that have brought us to this position. We are not operating in a strategic way. There are reasons for that.

Looking forward, there is a great deal of emphasis from the Christie commission and the Carnegie UK Trust on partnership working and different groups coalescing around key themes.

Outdoor learning and outdoor education could be an example of how to do that, because there are many good people out there who want to deliver high-quality outdoor learning and are doing so, struggling against the environment in which we do it, and who want to come together. We could be an exemplar for the partnership working that is required of us today.

10:15

Professor Higgins: It is helpful not to think about the outdoors as any different from the indoors, in the sense that it is just about kids learning. Just as progression, expression and depth are expected of teachers in classrooms, the same should be true in the outdoors. If you take a Scandinavian example, kids will be outdoors from the age of three and will spend most of their time outdoors. They will spend a lot of their curricular time outdoors throughout the whole of their school life, but they will also go on residential experiences and camps, and when they leave school they can join folk high schools where, for a whole year, they will spend their time outdoors learning.

To my mind, it is not a surprise that Scandinavian countries do so well with programme for international student assessment scores, but it is an accident of a progressive education system. Scotland has a progressive education system that is historically embedded, and we have done very well and are internationally well regarded and respected for the work that we do in the outdoors. We have many other things in place and, as my colleagues have been saying, we need to find some ways of joining things up. The great thing that is happening at the moment is that efforts are being made to do that. I suspect that, if we put more concerted effort into it, starting with the training of teachers—so that they know what to expect when the kids go through the school and when they go into adventurous experiences beyond school—we will be able to pull together a good, progressive policy for the future.

Liz Smith: I have a question about the training of teachers. I entirely agree with you and it is refreshing to hear you say that outdoor learning should be like indoor learning. However, many teachers, and particularly those who represent the teaching trade unions, are reluctant to participate because they feel that there is an added risk in the outdoors and some of them feel uncomfortable with that. Do you believe that that concern can be addressed through teacher training, or are there other things that we have to do?

Professor Higgins: That is not my experience these days. Five years ago, I would have agreed with you that that is a concern, but much less so now. I am involved in training teachers and in in-service work, as are many of our other colleagues in teacher education institutes, and I find that there is no reluctance. It is much more a case of asking whether the incoming trainee teachers have the mindset to walk out of the classroom door. By doing that, they develop an understanding that will lead to outdoor residential centre provision and experiences of that kind for their students.

There is no real reluctance, as I see it, among the trainees, other than a lack of familiarity with the outdoors. The safety issues are overblown; there is no real concern. None of us is focusing on that issue these days, so if the unions are thinking that way, perhaps a wee bit of readjustment of their expectations would be helpful.

Nigel Marshall: I have to qualify that a little bit, because my experience is slightly different from Pete Higgins's. There is a bit of a problem for teachers who are established in school, who definitely have concerns about the extra work involved and about what will happen if somebody has a little accident, because parental complaints to schools are fast and furious these days. I see quite a lot of that in the course of my work.

Some of the actions that have been taken recently to try to help that have been useful. Out of its meagre budget of £3,500 a year from our membership, the Scottish advisory panel has sponsored a national outdoor learning cards initiative, under which we train tutors in every local authority in Scotland. The idea of the learning cards is that they are like lesson plans, and they have been really popular. They started south of the border, where the outdoor education advisers' panel created them, and we have brought them north of the border and implemented them. That initiative has been welcomed by a great many teachers across Scotland, to whom it gives reassurance and a structure that allows them to get out there. It gives them a starting point, and we have delivered the training on that. Last year, we did a full year of it.

We have been working collaboratively with the Association of Heads of Outdoor Education Centres to build on that relationship and ensure a more constructive and strategic implementation of outdoor learning in Scotland. Just as our landscape has 32 different forms, so have our local authorities—you will have seen that in my written submission. I apologise for that, but you will understand the difficulty that I would have had in trying to harmonise them all. We have all those different landscapes and opportunities, and the learning cards have fitted in really well. Collaboration has made that happen.

In addition, we have created the "Going Out There" document in conjunction with the Scottish Government and other colleagues. We are trying to enable staff and give them the tools that they

need, and we have made that document available through our website. We realise that there are huge barriers for teachers, and we want to enable them and quieten it down a wee bit. That is where we are at with it at the moment. It is a long journey, to be honest.

The Convener: Professor Higgins mentioned the evidence from Scandinavia. What international evidence exists to support outdoor education? Instinctively, I would assume that it makes perfect sense and that it could help children's behaviour, motivation and attainment levels. What international evidence supports such a view?

Professor Higgins: It is an interesting question, because there are many different models of outdoor education and learning around the world, just as there are different forms of education. Following the publication of "Learning for Sustainability" by the one planet schools ministerial advisory group, we have recently done a couple of commissioned reviews specifically on the relationship between outdoor learning and attainment. Some key findings came out of those reviews.

People are always interested in whether going outdoors will help children to understand geography. It obviously does, but does it help them with maths? There is evidence that it does and that it also helps them with English. You can imagine a teacher taking kids out and doing poetry outdoors. Can you imagine a teacher taking kids out and counting the number of blades of grass on a soccer field using mathematics and statistical sampling? That kind of thing happens and it is possible to do that.

The international evidence suggests that it is not kids' perceptions of the subject areas themselves that benefit so much as their perception of the relationships between them. In other words, it benefits that big thing that is so difficult to get to, but which we all like in education—interdisciplinarity. How do we join up all the dots so that we see issues and start to apprehend and deal with them? There is quite strong evidence that the outdoors provides a space where such issues can be dealt with and discussed and where kids can learn not just about subject areas, but about the ways in which they join up.

The Convener: The PISA results were published last week, and the top five countries in those tables were all in south-east Asia. I only know what I saw in the news reports about that. Do those countries have outdoor education? It looked as though the kids are in school for 14 hours a day.

Professor Higgins: I think that they are in school a lot, but those countries also have remarkably extensive provision for outdoor learning. I do not want to suggest that outdoor learning is a direct line to PISA scores. Frankly, I am not particularly bothered about PISA scores because they measure only certain kinds of intelligence and certain approaches to education and learning. In south-east Asia, the approach is to focus on the things that do well in PISA scores, but that is not the approach in the rest of the world.

I cited the Scandinavian countries as an example because they have always done very well in PISA although they do not always get the top scores. They have much more progressive and broader education systems and they speak three or four languages. I would much rather not focus just on PISA scores, however. In broad education terms, they measure one element of child development but not the whole thing. PISA does absolutely nothing to assess understanding of interdisciplinary issues because everything that it measures is compartmentalised.

South-east Asia has outdoor education and there is a lot of interest in it. I have spent quite a bit of time in Singapore, working with people there on using the outdoors. That is deemed to be core to curricular development there, because of the range of personal development outcomes that come from the outdoors, as well as the interdisciplinary issues.

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): I will follow up Professor Higgins's points about the value. Convincing some children of the relevance of what they are learning to real-life experience is a challenge that many teachers face. Outdoor education and learning allow that gap to be bridged.

I represent Orkney, where experience of the sea, mountains and all the rest of it is not really a problem. As soon as children step out of school and are on the way home, they bump into that. However, I presume that outdoor education is as much about exposing those from rural communities to more urban environments as it is about hills, rivers, the sea and all the rest of it.

Professor Higgins: It certainly is. The benefits of what you are exploring are in things such as people taking responsibility for their actions, understanding that what they do and how they do it has consequences and getting a sense of place. Not everyone in Scotland lives in a rural environment, and we need to find ways of getting kids out of the classroom so that they understand their urban environments—the kinds of places that they experience daily.

There is a lot to be said for flipping kids from Orkney into the centre of Glasgow and vice versa, so that they see how other people live. How we get kids to understand and have a sense of their

place in Scotland involves the community of the city and of the Highlands and Islands. To make learning real and relevant to kids, responsibilities and understanding the consequences of actions, wherever they might be, are important.

Nigel Marshall: A Japanese lady came to our centre and interviewed me about outdoor education. I know that she also went to the University of Edinburgh and spoke to other colleagues throughout Scotland. She was extremely interested in what we are doing on leadership skills development. Since that interview, she has constantly bombarded me with emails to get more information out of us.

Japan does not have such a programme. It has fantastic students who are well educated and who end up moving away from their home city or wherever to work in another city for 12-hour days, where they are locked in a little room, so their whole life becomes what they can do on the internet and going to work. They have no social life whatever. I understand that a big initiative in Japan is to get such young professionals engaged in communities and so on, and one way forward is seen to be skills development.

The Japanese lady who came to our centre was very interested in our programme. That is another side to the residential work that we do; it is powerful and concerns skills for learning, skills for life and skills for work. If we do not do that, we are missing out. That is a big part of what we are about.

I have lived on an island for 35 years. It never ceases to amaze me how few young people there go to sea and how few go up mountains. The young people thirst for the other side; they call the island where I live the rock and they are constantly trying to escape off it—I am sure that the situation is the same in Orkney. Unless they come to us, they do not go up Goat Fell, which is the highest mountain on the island. They do not go into the environment—unless clubs organise that for them, they are reluctant to get involved. They thirst for the bright lights. It is difficult to engage them in the island's environment unless the activity is structured and created for them.

I am sorry, Mr McArthur, but that is my experience. My son was much the same—he wanted to play rugby and that was the way it was. I hope that what we do might counter that.

Dave Spence: It is incredibly important for young people from cities to experience the other 95 per cent of Scotland, which is not urbanised. That is particularly the case given the suggestion of a shortfall in the labour force that works outdoors in the future. It is important that those young people experience things outwith the city, but that goes the other way, too. Lots of children in rural areas are restricted in where they can go, because of farmland and other land use practices.

There are opportunities, as people have said, for young people to come to the central belt area or to the cities. On sustainability, perhaps more needs to be done about appreciating the interconnection between the city and rural areas. Outdoor education can achieve that for all those children.

10:30

Clare Adamson (Central Scotland) (SNP): I have a question for Professor Higgins. The European and External Relations Committee has been doing an inquiry into language teaching in schools, and one thing that we discovered quickly is that local authorities do not have any information about which teachers have language skills, particularly with regard to primary school teachers. It is interesting that you state in your submission:

"few schools have staff with specialist knowledge or qualifications".

What do you base that statement on?

Professor Higgins: Few school staff have specialist qualifications in outdoor learning.

Clare Adamson: You state:

"few schools have staff with specialist knowledge or qualifications".

Professor Higgins: Yes.

Clare Adamson: I want to know how you arrived at that conclusion, because it is quite a dramatic statement.

Professor Higgins: Yes. It is easy to substantiate that because the General Teaching Council for Scotland has a set of expectations for those of us who are teachers that relate to meeting the professional standards, and there are various tiers. The standard for full registration includes the possibility that the teacher has an outdoor education qualification. I happen to have one because I trained in Wales. I left Scotland to go to Wales to train to be a teacher of outdoor education. I came back to Scotland, and initially I could not get registered with the GTCS, although I did in the end.

I am involved in the process of accrediting people to become accredited teachers of outdoor education, and very few people go through the process—perhaps just one or two per annum. That is because there is no standard teaching qualification within Scotland, so there is nothing for the GTCS to compare with. It is not that it is not sympathetic; it is very sympathetic and it would love to have more people coming through asking

for exceptional registration and various other standards of registration.

It is interesting, because outdoor learning is now part of the revised professional standards, which include leadership, values and learning for sustainability—all teachers have to have those. The learning for sustainability skill set includes outdoor learning, so there is a bit of an impasse, as the GTCS is saying that it must happen, yet teachers are not being trained to enable them to deliver those three areas of leadership, values and learning for sustainability—particularly the latter.

At the moment, there is very little out there. Many teachers have specialist qualifications in outdoor activities, but they tend to be the province of outdoor centres. The places that Nigel Marshall and Dave Spence work in and that I used to work in have specialist skills in a range of outdoor activities, but they are outdoor activities and not outdoor learning. It is the equivalent of a physical education teacher having a netball qualification, a cricket qualification or a rugby qualification; the activities are not about the core issue of how we train people to work in the outdoors with young people. Therefore, I can make that statement in the submission with quite a high degree of confidence.

The Convener: I will bring in Christine Anderson in a moment, but I want to follow up on that point first. The statement in the submission is about knowledge and qualifications. Those are two entirely different things, clearly.

Professor Higgins: Sure—yes.

The Convener: In your answer, you concentrated on qualifications—quite rightly, because you can quantify those relatively easily—but knowledge is perhaps slightly more difficult to quantify.

Professor Higgins: That is a fair point.

The Convener: You state in your submission that we do not have staff with that specialist knowledge. What made you say that?

Professor Higgins: There is a confidence issue, partly because of a lack of experience. Relatively few schools take a lot of kids out to do many things, although the numbers are increasing. Some research that we have done over the past few years shows that, particularly in primary schools—credit should go to the Scottish Government and Education Scotland for pushing the outdoor learning agenda—teachers are much more confident about using the school grounds and going for a short walk beyond them. That has been facilitated by some in-service training of teachers that Education Scotland organised and that we are involved in, and it is all going very well.

Secondary school teachers are much less likely to take children outdoors because of the curricular demands on their time, although there is now much more opportunity for them to do so, particularly in secondary 1 to S3. Our research covers four different geographical areas in Scotland, so it is reasonably consistent. We found that, while there is keenness and willingness, there is a lack of confidence. I can go some way towards providing an answer for that. It is not widespread across the country, but it is indicative.

Clare Adamson: I hear what you are saying. My experience, first as a councillor and then as an MSP, is that experts are brought into secondary schools to deliver initiatives such as the Duke of Edinburgh's award and work with the John Muir Trust. Is that not more likely to happen in secondary schools, especially at the S4 and S5 levels?

Professor Higgins: Those collaborative partnerships happen throughout primary and secondary schools. However, we must be careful that we do not see that work as a proxy for teachers understanding the whole educational transaction that the outdoors can provide. Equity is an issue, as some schools will be able to do that work and others will not. It is not appropriate or fair to think that everything will be sorted if we bring the John Muir award into schools, or bring in RSPB Scotland or the local ranger service. Some schools will do that, and schools that are good at developing such relationships develop more and more of them. There are examples of high-quality work that could not be faulted in any way, but other schools do not develop those relationships. We need to ensure that all children across Scotland get what, to my mind, would be fair provision.

The Convener: I have a specific question for Christine Anderson. We have talked a lot about schools and I am happy for you to respond to any aspects of that discussion, but my question takes us back to where we started. How do schools know what qualifications teachers have that are not directly related to the jobs that they do? I had a maths teacher who happened to be a grade 1 rugby referee, among other things. How do we know about the interests, knowledge and experience of teachers in our schools?

Christine Anderson: That information would probably come through as part of the interview process when a person applies for a teaching job. After that, when a person is employed as a teacher, it is a case of talking to people. In addition, senior managers need to keep outdoor learning, for example, on the agenda of their regular discussions.

We have a recent initiative called at homes, whereby teachers visit different departments and

hear about what is happening there. In our May programme, two departments offered information on their outdoor learning. It is through such initiatives that we get to know about teachers' other qualifications.

I have a personal interest in the matter, so I am always keen to know what new members of staff do that is outdoors related and whether they have taken children out. While it is a question of giving them freedom to go and explore and do things, we must keep a tight rein. I happen to be the one person in our school who oversees everything. I therefore know when trips are taking place, which allows me to put the proper risk assessments in place, and I can advise teachers and discuss whether they have thought about this or that issue. As I manage the process, when I have staff meetings I can say, "So-and-so has been out and done this. Can we get any links with other departments?"

We have done quite a lot of interdisciplinary work, and when that takes off, other things spring from it. The John Muir award started following a week of John Muir activities, as you will have seen from our submission. The award is now part of the first year curriculum and the pupils are on a rota to study four different subjects—art, music, computing skills and design. Pupils do outside activities and then bring those back into the classroom. You might ask how they could do that with computing studies, but they look at what happens to computers when we have finished with them and how, for example, youngsters in other countries scrounge for bits of computers to sell on in order to make money to live.

The programme has had a big impact on our first years. At the end of the process, after the pupils have gone through the research and investigated matters, they write a postcard to the John Muir Trust explaining what they found out about the issues. That is a nice little activity that links all the work together.

We now have progression from that through to forest skills. We have called the programme forest skills and not forest schools because we do not have the resources to run the forest schools programme at the moment. The children go from their experience of the John Muir award in first year into the forest skills programme in second year, when they work in the woodlands around the school setting up minibeast traps, for example.

To go back to the question, a senior leader has to have their ears open, have their finger on the pulse and make the best use of the staff that they have. The programme is still driven to a large extent by people who are enthusiastic about outdoor learning, and there is still work to be done with other teaching staff who are perhaps not quite as passionate about it.

Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP): Comments have been made in various submissions about the lack of consistency in the approach to outdoor learning. How common is it for schools in Scotland to offer a diverse programme of outdoor learning? To touch on the rural-urban split, is there a significant difference between the approaches to outdoor learning in urban and rural environments or do the urban guys all want to go out into the rural areas and experience them in the same way?

Nigel Marshall: The membership of the Scottish advisory panel is mainly school-based. Only a few of us are engaged in outdoor centres. However, there are advisers in each authority and their responsibility is to support schools. Local authority strategies for outdoor learning have been drawn up. The majority of authorities have one in place, have set up strategy groups and are trying to implement a plan of outdoor learning. The plan will vary depending on the environment. An urban-based educationist who is an adviser will do the best that they can with the resources that they have at their disposal to implement the plan and to support schools strategically. Some of them will get involved in hands-on work and will deliver, but the majority are trying to organise things and pull them together.

In the rural environment, it will be completely different. There might be a more hands-on situation in which the adviser instructs and delivers a programme of outdoor learning through the curriculum for excellence, for example.

It very much depends on the environment, how many people the advisers have and the resources that they have available to them. As you said and as I state in my submission, the picture is extremely disparate. That is the issue, to be honest with you.

Dave Spence: I make a plea for other schools. There are many small to medium-sized schools in Scotland and, when I think about what they want, the word that I think of is diversity. No two schools are the same. Because of the combination and structure of teaching staff, some of whom are elderly and some of whom are new, the outdoor learning that small to medium-sized schools can provide one year is not necessarily the same as what they can do in subsequent years. We have worked with some schools for many consecutive years and even they change every time.

There is a huge amount of variation and it is difficult to pin things down. I do not think that we want to pin them down too much. For pragmatic reasons, it is not easy for schools to maintain a cohesive structure to their outdoor learning.

Professor Higgins: Christine Anderson's school is a peri-urban school with many

opportunities because of where it is located. If we go up the road 200m to the Royal Mile primary school, we see a school that does not have a blade of grass anywhere near it. One of my colleagues, Simon Beames, has done some extensive work with that school. The teachers there would not have thought of taking the kids anywhere—when they let them out, they let them out into the playground—but we have been doing some work taking them to the green land down here by the Parliament and opening up their expectations of what they might do with the children.

The urban-rural split is not the only one. There are many nuances, as Dave Spence said, and much depends on the precise location and the staff from year to year. We will get more coherent and consistent provision for young people only if the inspectorate looks seriously at outdoor learning as part of its regimes of inspection of primary schools, secondary schools, pre-schools and outdoor centres. We need Education Scotland's mindset to be such that it looks for outdoor learning and reports on good and less-good practice—only then will we start to sort things out. That means that the inspectorate needs to be trained so that it knows what to look for in the first place.

10:45

Colin Beattie: Witnesses have emphasised the diversity of schools and approaches. Are there common factors that enable good practice in outdoor learning in all schools?

Nigel Marshall: We can easily identify core elements that are common across the board. We have talked about a great school that has 18 acres of ground; other schools have virtually nothing, and some primary schools sit in the heart of the mountains. However, despite the huge diversity, there is identifiable good practice. I guess that the Scottish Government has identified the core elements in various documents, and we all—or at least, the quality places—try to implement them.

There is an issue to do with quality, as Pete Higgins implied, and there are areas of concern for everyone. 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.

It is good that voluntary groups and professional organisations are working well together along with the University of Edinburgh and other colleagues who have examples of good practice in schools. We are picking up on such examples, as is Education Scotland, and we are in a better place to take things forward, but we need help. Currently, we are not getting over the hurdles.

The Convener: Mr Higgins, in your submission, under the heading "Quality assurance", you state:

> "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".

You go on to discuss the quantity and other aspects of outdoor learning. Will you expand on what seems to be a disconnect between the direction of travel and the political support, which seem reasonably coherent, and the situation as you describe it?

Professor Higgins: I think that it is a question of timing. What makes things happen is a confluence of people, policy and place. We have talked a bit about place and the people in schools who make things happen, and the policy is increasingly in favour of developing outdoor learning opportunities. Credit is absolutely due to the people who have been involved in the process over the past few years. However, local authorities have not applied the policy guidance consistently. For example, "Curriculum for Excellence through outdoor learning" is a useful document and many people know that it is there, but the guidance in it has not been consistently applied. If advisers on the advisory panel have the ear of a director of education and there is a good tradition and culture in the local authority, things are more likely to happen than is the case if there is not such a background.

It is therefore understandable that provision across Scotland is mixed, and it will take time for that to change. What will help is more coherent and consistent policy from the Scottish Government, more from Education Scotland, which has been doing quite a lot to help over the past wee while, 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 work of the General Teaching Council for Scotland will help in the process, too.

Colin Beattie: Given the comments that have been made about diversity and consistency of provision, I am unclear what mechanisms are in place to ensure the spread of good practice or, indeed, to learn from the various challenges that local authorities and schools might have encountered. How does that happen?

Nigel Marshall: The sharing of good practice quite often takes place at the Scottish advisory panel. It has regular meetings at which all the advisers come together to share good practice, and each authority gives presentations about what it has delivered. That gives us a good idea of how

diverse the provision is—to be honest—but it also shows what can be done with small resources and with what are comparatively enormous resources.

The issue of diversity is a problem for everyone: the questions of what is regular, what is frequent and what is an entitlement are a big problem. Although outdoor education might be a council's policy and something that it would like to happen, the reality of the situation is that it is not statutory and is therefore just an option. There is no headteacher who has to comply with the aim of getting their children outdoors. It is a good thing if they can do it, but they are quite often more interested in what their exam results are. That is the sort of problem that we are up against.

Colin Beattie: I do not think that I got an answer to the first question that I asked. How common is it for schools in Scotland to offer a diverse programme on outdoor learning? Is the situation patchy? Do most schools do it or just a few? Do all local authorities do it or just some? Is it just a bit of a lottery?

Dave Spence: In my organisation, we see more than 2,000 teachers a year from more than 250 schools. There is a huge amount of variation in what they are looking for. Some of them are excellent, see the connection between outdoor learning and the curriculum for excellence, and are willing to roll their sleeves up and get stuck in, while others want to watch from a distance—possibly from a deckchair, with a glass of white wine. I joke, but the range is quite enormous.

It is difficult for some teachers to understand the potential of outdoor learning. Everyone has a fixed idea of what it means. As soon as you mention the phrase, people think about helmets and harnesses and muddy boots, but those are just the tools of the trade that help us to get young people into learning situations. We need to concentrate more on the quality agenda.

In recent years, we have put in bids for local authority tenders and have been asked how many accidents there have been and how many activities children can use. We are not asked about quality at all. Just because it is difficult to measure quality does not mean that we should not do it. We can and we should.

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.

Professor Higgins: If I may—

The Convener: I am slightly conscious of time and we have a few areas still to cover. Liam McArthur has a brief supplementary question.

Liam McArthur: I am intrigued by Dave Spence's comments about trying to get a handle on the expertise and passions of staff, which Christine Anderson also mentioned earlier. Are qualifications an inhibitor, or is what is required simply a degree of enthusiasm and understanding and, as Dave Spence said, the willingness to roll up your sleeves and get involved?

Christine Anderson: Yes, to the latter. However, schools must also invest in their staff. If they want to access training in something, we try to find the funding that will enable them to do that.

Liam McArthur: So the absence of the qualification is not an inhibitor.

Christine Anderson: No, it is not.

We also think that it is important that we do not rely only on our staff. It is good for our youngsters to get the opportunity to work with other people. Going to outdoor centres, meeting other staff, seeing other people doing things and seeing teachers in a different light—one in which they are learning things as well—is important.

Liam McArthur: Do schools work collaboratively to get around the fact that individual schools might not have all the skills that are required? Because of their size, some of the schools in Orkney come together to engage in outdoor education, either within Orkney or in places such as the Lagganlia centre for outdoor learning in Inverness-shire. That enables them to offer something that they could not offer on their own. Does that happen elsewhere as a matter of course?

Nigel Marshall: There is a great need for a particular continuous professional development budget for school staff. Helping staff to become better educated about the outdoors gives them confidence and allows people to get out there. Our advisory panel would make a plea for help to train staff. For every person who is trained there is a multiple impact, and at the moment there is less and less skill.

To answer Mr Beattie's question, I think that the provision is patchy at the moment but is getting less so. Good, constructive CPD, combined with firm views on how to get staff engaged, would be helpful in that regard.

Our advisory panel is already trying to deliver training for co-ordinators of visits to encourage and enable them to make judgments about where to take people and to tackle some of the myths that exist around what can happen. We hope to deliver that training ourselves—even though we have no budget for it—and it would be a great help

to schools because it would mean that they have people on their staff who can make judgment calls without fear.

A lot of the barriers are myths. Teachers, including headteachers, have to work through a set of procedures to get children out the door, and that is difficult. If there were a day course that trained teachers to understand the procedures and gave them the tools to get young people outdoors, in whatever environment, that would be worth while. There are lots of examples of that important training, but there is no budget to supply it.

Christine Anderson: Midlothian has an outdoor learning service, and we can access that kind of training, which is extremely useful for staff.

Professor Higgins: Let us imagine that computers were new things that were coming into schools: we would want to train staff how to use them. What we have here is a concept of outdoor learning—or outdoor education; whatever the continuum is—that requires staff to be properly trained if they are to make full use of it.

The quality of that CPD needs to be assured. There are any number of people who will jump into this area and sell their wares without having the skills and background to do it properly. We need to ensure that we have good-quality provision at the start, so that teachers understand properly what they are doing.

Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab): I want to ask about barriers to increasing provision, particularly with regard to cost.

We have talked about the difference between urban and rural schools, but it strikes me that there is a big difference between schools in deprived areas and schools in affluent areas when it comes to accessing outdoor learning.

I know that there are different aspects and categories of outdoor learning, but, while there are schools in affluent areas that can fund annual field trips and so on because the parents can afford it, there are other schools in urban areas, and possibly in rural areas, that cannot afford that kind of field trip.

I imagine that there will be exceptions to the rule, but is that what you think the case is in general? Do you think that that is acceptable? What do you think should be done to ensure that all children, regardless of income, can have access to all aspects of outdoor learning?

11:00

Nigel Marshall: I come from North Ayrshire and we have a fair degree of deprivation there. A third of the children who come to our centre at the moment come free of charge, but that privilege is being challenged because of the austerity measures that are hitting all councils. It is almost certain that, at some stage, those children will have to pay, and that could have an impact on them.

We are looking at other ways of supporting the children, but it is a serious matter. Equal opportunity and inequity should be important things for the committee to consider, because the lack of budgets and support for children will have an impact in the future. It is great that you asked that question, because deprivation is serious and will affect children's opportunities.

Christine Anderson: As a school, we try to fund youngsters who are not able to pay. They may pay a small contribution, and we will find money to fund the rest. I have used the John Watson's Trust and similar organisations to fund places, and that really helps. That said, it helps only the odd one or two youngsters, and the parents will pick up quite a lot of the cost when children go away to the Benmore centre or somewhere like that.

We fundraise through a sponsored walk, and part of the money gets put to one side so that we can enable youngsters to go out on trips and pay for it if there is a problem. It is a case of trying to use budgets creatively so that people feel that they can be included and that the cost of something is not preventing them from taking part, so we will go a long way to try to sort that out.

Dave Spence: Much as Christine Anderson will look for people who are motivated about outdoor learning, some schools also look for teachers who are motivated about raising money. They are really quite ingenious in the way in which they can get money—from not just bag packing but a whole range of methods—but it is a drain on the staff.

What we see is that we are getting the same number of groups, schools and organisations coming to us but with fewer children. That is a worry, because teachers want equity in general and they want all their children to benefit from the experience. If only a certain percentage of pupils can be funded—I do not know what that percentage is—the teachers might decide that it is not right, because of the added burden to the school of those who have to stay behind, and that they cannot put the trip together. That is a concern.

Professor Higgins: The issue is not just with residential provision: there are plenty of schools that have zero budgets for local outdoor learning opportunities.

I can think of a school not far from Christine Anderson's where the budget for outdoor learning is zero. There is a teacher who does the work, but she has to raise all the money for everything

herself. If the kids need gloves, she just goes and buys them, because there is no other provision.

If we want to take outdoor education seriously, we need to think about skilling the staff in schools and not always diverting their attention towards trying to raise funds to keep the minimal service going. That is truly what happens in some places—let alone the prospect of going to a residential centre, which for some kids is a fantasy land—because the schools have no funds to support them.

Neil Bibby: Cuts to local government budgets were mentioned earlier. Is there a danger that the cost of outdoor learning will prove too much for local authorities and that too much of a burden will be placed on families to meet the cost of such activities?

Professor Higgins: I shall start to answer that question, but I do not want to hog the conversation.

Essentially, one of my reasons for being a proponent of local outdoor learning opportunities is to get the kids out so that they at least understand their local place and get to do some things outdoors. That is the minimum, but we need to think of it as a progressive endeavour. As we said at the start of the discussion, it is not one thing or the other; it is progressive.

The budgets are really tight. There is an awful lot that you can do without money, but there is a really interesting question of equity. My daughter recently went to an outdoor centre, and I was almost minded to write to the headteacher to say, "Could you please explain why I have to pay £250 for this experience? If this is curricular, if it is valuable and if it is in term time, why am I expected to pay for my daughter to go?" We do not ask children to pay for other things, so there is an interesting question to be answered. I am not trying to diss the idea that we ask parents to supplement their children's education, but there is an issue of principle, particularly for kids whose parents have no income or a low income.

Neil Bibby: If there is no outdoor learning budget in certain areas, do you think that there should be a budget for those activities?

Professor Higgins: Of course, there should be provision to support children who have no opportunity to find funds from any other source. That is traditionally what Christine Anderson's school and other schools have done, and local authorities have also had budgets for that. However, as Nigel Marshall said, those budgets are being cut and there is much less opportunity to provide that support.

I do not think that there should be a dedicated outdoor education budget, as the issue is about good-quality education. To me, there is no distinction between good-quality indoor education and good-quality outdoor education. It is up to schools to decide what they provide, but it is for us and yourselves to decide what the policy might be and what areas of Scottish education need to be pushed and promoted—and there needs to be evidence behind that policy.

The Convener: I would like to clarify something. I have a child at secondary school who has been on outdoor residential weekends and other activities. I was asked to contribute to the cost and I gladly did so. I understood that I was contributing to the food and accommodation costs, not the cost of the learning as such, and that seemed entirely reasonable. My child normally goes to school in the day and comes home in the evening, so the school does not pay for their accommodation.

Professor Higgins: That is not true everywhere.

Nigel Marshall: That is a fair and reasonable way to go about it, convener, and that is what happens at the centre that I manage. However, there are some children who are seriously challenged and who are living on far less than what we charge.

The deprivation that we see at our place is sometimes so severe that it is shocking, so we help out—that is the best way to put it without going into too much detail. Some of the children who come to us are actually getting respite from being carers in their own homes, and some do not normally sleep in a warm bed at night. We give them the opportunity to see an alternative to their lives; we give them a chance to aspire to a different world.

We have been challenged. In the past, various people have said to me, "This is a one-off experience. How can it be meaningful?" Even more relevant today than it was in the past, however, is the chance to show young people in Scotland that there is an alternative and that there are nice people who will be knowledgeable friends and take them out in the fresh air to enjoy the Scottish environment without making it too complicated. For some children, even a place such as Arran, which is only an hour away on a ferry from where they live, provides a completely different environment that they can enjoy in safety.

I am not saying that all the children who come to us are like that. Some middle-class children have suffered slightly different deprivation but are still deprived because their parents do not give them the amount of time that they require from them, and our people provide that. There are also role models in the centres—people whom young men from single-parent families can aspire to be like.

I could go on: there are lots of things that are now happening, and the role of an outdoor centre is quite different from what it was in the past. The adventurous activities that people at the centre deliver often take children into an arena in which they work with only one man or lady who acts as a role model and somebody whom they can talk to in a way that they cannot talk at home. All those things are valuable, and I personally think that outdoor centres should be an entitlement for everybody.

The Convener: I will bring in Dave Spence, but Liam McArthur wanted to come in on this area.

Liam McArthur: I am happy to hear what Dave Spence has to say first.

Dave Spence: It is important that we look at how all outdoor learning, not just residential learning, is financed. I would promote residential learning as I think that it is a good idea, but there are many other types of outdoor learning that are valuable and essential in the whole picture.

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.

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.

The Convener: Christine, do you have anything to add?

Christine Anderson: No—my points have been covered.

Liam McArthur: I am glad that I let Dave Spence come in first because, in a sense, he has answered the question that I was going to pose.

We have heard about the need to bring together policy, people and place, but conspicuously absent from that is the issue of resource. I suppose that resource is how we give effect to policy, support people and deliver place in an accessible way, so I am interested in the panel's views on how we open up a debate about how we properly resource the provision.

Additionally, from what has been said so far, it seems that there might be a risk that the current provision will no longer be available in five or 10 years if we do not crack the resource issue. Is that the case?

Professor Higgins: I came from a practical background. When I worked in the field, there was no expectation that anything other than the costs of food and travel would be provided for residential provision and, in schools, there was no expectation that any costs whatsoever would be covered when children did local outdoor learning. We now have a mixed model in which there is local authority provision in schools, local authority provision in centres, provision from charitable trusts and commercial provision. That is the case for both residentials and for provision in and around schools.

To me, the issue is one of equity—which we have talked about—and of what is a sufficient budget stream to support meaningful outdoor learning in schools and beyond in outdoor centres.

I return to the issue of training teachers in the first place. They need to be selected so that they are interested in the outdoors and trained before they start and through in-service provision.

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 not talking about the sort of work that Nigel Marshall and Dave Spence do; I am talking about commercial providers that charge significant amounts and make a good profit.

We need to ensure that if there is money—whether it is parents' money or it comes from a budget—it is used wisely. I would first go for some form of provision within local authorities to ensure that schools know what they are doing, and then think about how to support residential provision, particularly—given that budgets are not endless—for children who cannot find funds themselves. That is the top-up model that Christine Anderson talked about. It would be lovely to have millions of pounds to provide support for everyone, but that is

not going to happen, so we need to start from where we are and see where we can get to.

Dave Spence: It is a big question. I return to one of my first statements, which was that we need to look at partnership working. There are a lot of organisations with good people who want to do such work and who want to interface effectively with formal education.

If we are to have that development in partnership working, we have to provide CPD on what partnership working is. Local authorities have lost the knack of seeing the benefits of partnership working, but that is where the future has to be, because the issue is not going to go away. We must use all the resource that we have, and it sometimes comes from places that we might not expect.

We have to look at how we can encourage those in schools and local authorities to recognise the benefits that partnership working will bring them. We need to recognise that a great deal of creativity and imaginative work has come from third-sector providers. Fascinating concepts such as the Duke of Edinburgh and John Muir award schemes have emerged from the third sector. We need to look at supporting organisations that have that sort of creativity about them.

We must also avoid the converse situation in which a public agency seeks to take control of those creative ideas because it views that as an easy option to enable it to stay in the game and remain a part of the outdoor learning world, as that leads only to creativity being stifled.

11:15

Nigel Marshall: To answer Liam McArthur's question, 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.

There are initiatives coming from the few local authority centres that currently exist. For example, some are being used as cash cows and are expected to recover more money and hit financial targets above their zero budget, which is quite concerning. Some centres are being asked to shrink their availability to local authority schools so that they can bring in money from outside agencies to offset the costs of running the local authority. That is because of budget pressures.

That was never the intention—I have spoken to ministers and policy makers from the Scottish Government who told me so quite clearly. They said that the policy is to ensure that the centres are available for young people to allow them to engage with the real outdoors and have authentic experiences. There is a serious challenge in that respect: if you want to preserve those experiences for young people in the future, you need to think carefully about how you will support the provision, because it is very definitely under threat.

Christine Anderson: I do not have the knowledge to enable me to comment on the budget, but I would add that, over the years, the ring fencing of additional moneys coming into the school has been really useful because it means that the money cannot be touched by other people and we can do some work with it.

If putting more money into schools for outdoor activities is on the agenda, that type of approach might be very beneficial, as you can say that some of the moneys coming to schools for curriculum for excellence have to be channelled down the outdoor learning route.

Jayne Baxter (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): We have heard about how we need to ensure quality and achieve consistency; about what works and what does not work; about the need to address barriers to improvement; and about how we fund all that. What role can curriculum for excellence play in that regard? It was mentioned in some earlier answers. Is there scope to nail things down through the curriculum for excellence process?

Christine Anderson: In the next couple of years, when teachers in secondary schools have become au fait with the new qualifications and are beginning to feel more comfortable and more at ease with the assessment arrangements, we will start to see outdoor learning taking off at secondary level. That is not such an issue in years 1 to 3, but at present staff are very focused on the new qualifications and on ensuring that they get things right for our youngsters. The focus on outdoor learning will develop as we go through the process, but at present a lot of the emphasis in school is on looking to the senior years to get that sorted out.

Nigel Marshall: I agree with that. Skills development is already pretty well embedded, and colleagues across the country have embedded curriculum for excellence in what they are doing. Experiences, outcomes and all those things are embedded in what we are trying to do within the strategy documents that I mentioned earlier. That is all part and parcel, and it already exists. The implementation will take some time, but we are making progress on that—it is a time issue.

At secondary level, there is a much more practical aspect—certainly with the new qualifications—to some of the more social subjects. We have already had quite a lot of inquiries about that, and our colleagues are looking at how to implement it. They are having to

cross borders to get skills and to work collaboratively with people in adjacent authorities who have skills in order to deliver on that agenda. There are positive things happening, such as that work, but we are just starting on the route. That is another good example of where the Scottish advisory panel can work with schools.

Dave Spence: I am in danger of being contentious here. As I said, I see lots of different teachers, and one whom I admire enormously came to me and said, "I love what you're doing here, including the rapport of the tutors and the formative assessment approach, but thank goodness they're not talking about curriculum for excellence because we're sick of it."

I think that the role will emerge over time—that goes back to the diversity issue. Peter Higgins mentioned that, although a lot of work is going into preparing new teachers for outdoor learning, a lot of teachers who were trained pre-curriculum for excellence are still with us and will be for decades to come. I will turn that concern on its head a little and suggest that outdoor learning can be a useful medium in which teachers can come together and learn new ways of doing things, including learning about curriculum for excellence. The outdoors can provide a forum in which they can engage in interdisciplinary learning, which is a bit of a hurdle in some secondary schools.

It is about not what curriculum for excellence can do for us, but what we can do for curriculum for excellence.

Jayne Baxter: What could the Scottish Government, Education Scotland or the General Teaching Council for Scotland do to push the agenda?

Professor Higgins: In a way, we do not have a choice given that curriculum for excellence has already been embedded—partially, at least—in expectation and policy through the document "Curriculum for Excellence through outdoor learning", the GTC's professional standards and Education Scotland's work plans. Those organisations are already doing that work.

Expectations need to be raised to the effect that every teacher will have to do that. Irrespective of whether they were trained pre-curriculum for excellence, we should say, "This is your job and you need to do this." For me, the most profound element of curriculum for excellence is the expectation that it will be part of the professional requirements for teachers in the future. I would like to see further guidance and support from Education Scotland and collaborative work with the GTC, much of which is already happening.

In addition, there is an issue of priority. Much of what happens in schools at present is quite clearly defined within curricular subject areas, but we have been talking about interdisciplinary working. If I could make one plea to the committee, it would be this. In less than a year's time we will have a debate on the future of Scotland—we are having the debate already, but there will be a decision—and in my view outdoor learning is quintessentially about the nature of this nation. We have talked about education but not about environment, and children will not understand their environment without spending time in it. We need to think about physical activity and recreation. Many of us are of a certain age at which we do not play soccer or netball any more—or any of those games—but we might continue to hill walk. There are elements of physical activity and wellbeing that we need to consider.

There is also the issue of green tourism and recreation in the landscape around us, as well as culture, heritage and history. All those things are about the outdoors, as is green energy. Areas such as agriculture, forestry, fisheries and food are all about the outdoors. We cannot understand this place in which we live without thinking about the land, the landscape and the people. To me, that is by far the strongest argument for getting kids outdoors now. 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. It is not just about curriculum for excellence—that is part of it, but it is about something else above and beyond that. It would be lovely to have a debate about the nature of our nation once the decision of next September is over and done with.

Dave Spence: Peter Higgins has been eloquent in explaining—quite rightly—a lot of the broader connections to what we are about. However, for me 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?"

I welcome the fact that the committee has asked us to come here today and I hope that you take a regular and on-going interest in outdoor learning. It needs to be led from the top and directed in such a way that you are able to keep an eye on it because 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?

As I mentioned, there is a bit of sport, a bit of health and wellbeing, a bit of education and a bit of youth policy involved in outdoor learning but we are falling between all those different interests and that is doing us a disservice. Outdoor learning needs to be pulled together and co-ordinated.

Nigel Marshall: I endorse everything that Dave Spence and Pete Higgins have said. The bigger

picture is the important thing. I agree that we have fallen within four different policy units and often get no answer to the question, "Who is the master here?" We end up being bumped from one place to another. It is not so much that we are a disparate group—we are a pretty well co-ordinated group and we all know what we love—as that we just cannot get anybody to take responsibility for us. That is the truth of the matter.

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—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.

We love curriculum for excellence—we think that it is great. We think that it is the greatest thing that ever happened to the outdoors and would love the opportunity to develop it further.

Christine Anderson: I do not have much more to offer—the other panellists have all been very eloquent. From a school's point of view, it would be good to know who is running outdoor education and where we can go for advice. It would be good if it was the same across the whole country, but it is not at the moment. Although we need things to be happening locally, we also need one central body.

I make a plea from the heart that funding for outdoor centres really needs to be a priority. We can do many things in schools, but without the people in the outdoor centres youngsters will not get the same experience, so it is very important that outdoor centres exist.

The Convener: Thank you very much. We are right up against the wall on time, but I know that Joan McAlpine has a supplementary on this area.

Joan McAlpine (South Scotland) (SNP): My supplementary relates to Peter Higgins's point. In the part of the country that I represent, the south of Scotland, the University of Glasgow has opened the Solway centre for environment and culture on the Crichton campus. The centre has projects such as community archaeology, which links people with their heritage through the environment.

To develop what Peter Higgins was saying, the Government is supposed to be developing a strand called Scottish studies in the curriculum, which would link all these things. Is that happening? Is that having an effect on outdoor education? Has it touched your area at all?

Professor Higgins: I do not know quite how to answer that. Of course, there was a ministerial advisory group on Scottish studies and a report was published—I was asked to comment eventually, in the latter stages of that process. I made pretty much the point that I have just made, which is that the landscape is integral to Scottish studies.

I am not familiar with the rate of progress, but if we have a strand within education that is on Scottish studies, it must focus on the landscape as much as it focuses on anything else. Outdoor learning can support that.

11:30

The same is true of the other ministerial advisory groups. For example, I was involved in the one planet schools group, which led to the "Learning for Sustainability" report, but the fact is that you cannot take sustainability as a theme without also thinking about the land and the landscape. If we could bring those two major areas of educational development together in certain ways to allow landscape and place to become a core element of all this, we would really have something to sing about. Scotland has a great reputation and is among the world's leading nations in this area, but we could really set out our stall if we pulled these things together.

Nigel Marshall: To be honest, I think that this happens by default when you work outdoors. Scottish studies is happening but, as I have pointed out in my submission, a whole load of people do not realise that it is. Instead of any deliberate movement from policy level down to the grass roots, it has happened accidentally. I think that that is the best way I can put it.

Christine Anderson: This issue is very important. After all, I know that youngsters in schools do not know where bits and pieces of Scotland are.

The Convener: Not just youngsters.

Christine Anderson: When you ask them where the Outer Hebrides are, they just do not have a clue. As a result, we need to get across the message that it is very important for them to know about our country. They might go to the south of France or Spain on their holidays but have never been any further north of, say, Brechin.

Joan McAlpine: With regard to the sustainability strategy, which Professor Higgins referred to, how far have we got in linking the 31 recommendations in "Learning for Sustainability" to outdoor education?

Professor Higgins: In March, the minister, Alasdair Allan, accepted the 31 recommendations, almost all of them, including the five key

recommendations, in full. After that, the usual process—and indeed expectation—is for an implementation group to be set up and, indeed, that was what was agreed. The implementation group was to start work as soon as practicable. However, the staff supporting the advisory group were moved to other duties and it has taken a while for the replacement staff to come into post, get things set up and think about what experts they need in the implementation group and what advice they need. The last stages of that process are taking place at the moment. Almost all the group's members have been decided on, but there are one or two that still have to be tidied up to ensure that the group is ready to start work, probably in January 2014.

Joan McAlpine: One of the specific recommendations is about policies regarding school buildings and grounds. Is the fact that some schools have been built under the private finance initiative creating difficulties for outdoor learning and sustainability?

Professor Higgins: Yes, although it has to be said that all forms of school buildings generate difficulties as far as sustainability is concerned. The new regulations that are being brought in should bring buildings up to an appropriate standard, but certain issues arise where PFI or a public-private partnership is involved because you cannot modify those buildings. However, the issue is much bigger than that. The fact is that most schools do not have the money to modify the buildings in the first place, and modification of buildings in general is a problem.

Joan McAlpine: Does anyone else have anything to add?

Christine Anderson: As someone who works in a school that is 30 years old and needs a fair bit of work done to it, I have to say that we struggle to find the funding to do that work. That said, we have been able to tap into the local community to run projects in the school grounds. For example, a local gardening company has just done some work for us on creating a garden that the youngsters will be able to grow things in. It is good to be able to do that kind of thing, but the school building itself is another matter.

Dave Spence: A few years ago, an Edinburgh architect designed a primary school in northern Norway that was heated by lamps and children's body heat. I do not think that people see the potential or opportunities in developing schools to save money. We seem to think that adding green elements is a cost, but it does not have to be that way. There are zero-energy buildings all over Europe, although I do not think that there are many in this country yet.

I realise that I am straying from the issue of outdoor learning, but I certainly think that there are opportunities in that respect. It all comes back to the change that I referred to and the opportunities that it presents. Change does not always have to be a negative thing.

Professor Higgins: Heaps of research evidence shows that children pick up on what we as adults do and that what you do matters much more than what you say. That is true of buildings, which is one of the reasons why this is so important, but the same is also true of procurement. The many restrictions on the operation of local authorities—and, as a consequence, schools—mean that they do not necessarily buy things in an ethical way, in a way that saves money and in a way that demonstrates the importance of ethical procurement and therefore ethical expenditure to young people. This is a major issue for our schools' infrastructure and practice.

Nigel Marshall: I have seen a few PFI buildings. My understanding from colleagues is that the majority of headteachers are very much involved in the design process, but whether that works its way through to the final building is a different matter. Quite often, finances and other issues will dictate what happens—and, quite often, it will be the outdoor-type things that will be sacrificed. There are some great examples of gardens in schools—in fact, I know of a school that has plots right through the town where the pupils can grow things—and of headteachers taking the initiative and installing traverse walls for climbing, but there is no strategic advice that I am aware of on creating outdoor spaces, allowing children to move around outdoors to get to classrooms the way we used to in the past, emphasising light and so on.

Joan McAlpine: Coming back to Professor Higgins's comments about procurement, I imagine that you will be aware that the Government's Procurement Reform (Scotland) Bill is going through the Parliament. Do you hope that that legislation will provide the kind of clarity that is needed to move towards more ethical procurement? My understanding is many of the people in local authorities who are in charge of procurement are so concerned about, say, European rules that they sometimes err too much on the side of caution.

Professor Higgins: I cannot really respond to that question because I do not know what is in the bill. However, whatever it does, I certainly hope that it takes such ethical issues into consideration. After all, it is not always about the apparent cost; as we all know, you can sometimes save money by spending more.

As my wife works as an outdoor teacher in a PFI school, I know from personal experience that none of the things that we are discussing would be possible there. For example, she would not be able to build a garden or put up a climbing wall. In that respect, there are many variations in practice.

The Convener: I thank all the witnesses for their extremely interesting and helpful evidence. I have no doubt that we will discuss among ourselves where we go from here.

11:39

Meeting suspended.

11:41

On resuming—

Subordinate Legislation

Adoption (Recognition of Overseas Adoptions) (Scotland) Regulations 2013 (SSI 2013/310)

Adoption (Recognition of Overseas Adoptions) (Scotland) Amendment Regulations 2013 (SSI 2013/335)

The Convener: The next item on the agenda is consideration of two negative instruments. The second of the instruments amends the first and, taken together, they specify the countries and territories whose adoption orders are recognised in Scots law as overseas adoptions.

As members have no comments on these instruments, does the committee agree to make no recommendation to the Parliament on them?

Members *indicated agreement.*

The Convener: As our next item is in private, I close the meeting to the public.

11:42

Meeting continued in private until 12:31.

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