

PERSPECTIVE:

A role for local authority outdoor centres in remote locations

by Andy Robinson, IOL CEO

The recently launched e-petition to force a debate about outdoor education and field study centre closures at Westminster raises a number of interesting issues for our sector to reflect on. Ignoring the rights and wrongs of the direct public subsidising of outdoor education centres I believe it is important that we think very carefully about the potential loss of some fantastic resources in the sector and the impact on the population of talented outdoor professionals associated with them.

It seems to me that the acquisition by local authorities of buildings in some of the UK's most beautiful and rugged terrain over the past 50 years has been a crucial factor in the development of many of the outdoor learning disciplines we know today. The role that those local authorities have played in ensuring large numbers of children and young people experienced adventure in amazing surroundings, regardless of social and economic well being, should not be underestimated. The economic realities of the past few years have required significant changes to the way in which public services are funded. Some local authorities made the decision to make their outdoor residential centres 'self financing', a few years ago. In the majority of cases this has resulted in business models able to work within the current restraints on public spend. Where the local authority chose to directly subsidise its outdoor education centres the last year has seen the closure of centres and the on-going process of 'invitations to tender' for many others. Though disappointingly some authorities have taken the opportunity to dispose of assets to raise cash or pulled out of potential liabilities or simply sort to streamline its services across the board, some authorities are realising the need to be creative in finding solutions. The recently announced partnership between Wigan and the Brathay Trust is a good example. To quote the Leader of Wigan Council "The Lake District may be relatively close to Wigan Borough but we are conscious that many children and young people from our borough would never have been or indeed have the chance to go.....I am therefore delighted that we can develop a partnership with Brathay that will enable future generations of local children to broaden their experiences by visiting the Lakes."

I am aware of the challenges of running residential outdoor centres in rural locations, especially when those centres use even more remote locations for adventurous activities. I am also very aware of how living for a few days in such environments, especially when your usual surroundings are urban, can transform your view of self, others and nature. Whilst we should rightly celebrate the increased access to outdoor



learning through movements like Forest Schools and facilities like large residential centres with wide ranges of on-site adventurous activities, I think we need to be clear what dimensions of outdoor learning we may be losing if we continue to see the closure of residential centres in more rural locations.

What role does the location of a residential centre play in the impact it has on those who stay there? Reflecting on my own experience as a teenager on a residential field trip, it was an early morning walk beside a partially frozen stream with views to snow covered hill tops that ignited a passion for wild places. It was living in a beautiful wild environment for a few days that left me wanting to ensure that such an experience could be had by others and developing an awareness of the need to live with nature. Such heightening of a sense of place is difficult to achieve at a distance. I think it is worth considering what models allow urban local authorities to enable children and young people to gain access to outdoor learning in national parks and other 'wild' environments.

Interestingly Wigan Council's press release includes another statement; 'The agreement [between the Council & Brathay] stipulates that the centres must be available for Wigan families'. Though it may be argued that providing outdoor experiences for children fulfils this, the statement raises the issue of potential wider use of centres that have been traditionally limited to schools and youth groups. I don't underestimate the logistical difficulties associated with such an expansion of service but I do think the potential for working with 'new client groups' exists. Again creative partnerships may be a solution.

All of this is a bit academic if the existing residential centres are lost to the outdoor learning sector. Forcing a debate at Westminster may be too late for some centres but has to be the right move for wider population. If nothing else it will create an awareness of the range of models that exist amongst local authorities. ■

Photograph from Low Bank Ground Team