

P-05-1135 Targeted funding for residential outdoor education centres, now unable to operate for 12 months, Correspondence – Petitioner to Committee, 16.02.21

I would like to thank you for taking the time to respond to my concerns and those of many others who work in this key sector in rural areas of Wales.

I am pleased that the Minister recognises the contribution that residential outdoor education plays in the lives of young people. For many children it is the highlight of their educational career, a crucial developmental step, for some a chance to shine, explore localities unlike their own, take on challenge and succeed. It opens their world. The benefits and how they contribute to confidence, enhanced engagement in learning and increased academic success are incomparable. I would suggest it is the forum where children's hopes and dreams in the classroom become a reality in real life. A chance to be inspired. Moving forward and supporting children's mental health, fitness, social skills, reengagement with learning and a much-needed connection to and understanding of nature is a focus need now like never before.

I would also put forward the argument strongly that in addition to the huge educational and environmental impact these centres have. They also form a substantial part of our rural economies, providing skilled careers and supporting many local suppliers and services. The estimated inward investment to Wales from outdoor education centres is around £40m per year with the industry supporting 1500 jobs. It is a sad reflection that 15% of this industry has already been wiped from our landscape since the start of the pandemic.

I note the support that the government has provided for businesses and their commitment to continuing this support. I would highlight one key difference for consideration. **All other businesses receiving these streams of financial support were able to open for a period of 2020 and were able to limit the damage to their businesses in this way. Outdoor education centres have not been able to open for their main purpose since March 2020 resulting in an effective close of business for what will now be at least a year of trading. The damage to these businesses has been far greater.** Further to this it remains unclear as to how long the restrictions will remain in force. We are in a situation where restrictions have not yet been lifted for our sector for a whole year and we are yet to be included in any "roadmap" out of lockdown.

A common rebuttal to the above is the notion that outdoor education centres are open as they are able to provide day visits for schools. This may be the case in some more urban areas of Wales but the vast majority of residential centres it is not. Most have seen a drop in income equivalent to 95% – 99%. This is for the following reasons:

- By nature of what they provide outdoor education centres are often located in national parks and wild rural landscapes far from urban populations. Travel times for day trips are just too far.
- Centres are clustered together in areas of low population. There is not enough "local" population to go around.
- Residential Outdoor Education Centres tend to keep the same customers year on year. Customers come from specific areas. Looking for new "local" customers means taking customers from neighbouring centres who already serve those schools.
- High fixed costs of maintaining large residential sites means that income from day visits just isn't sustainable. Often the costs of bringing operations online are not balanced by what would be recovered by income from day visits. i.e., a further loss would be sustained.

It simply isn't fair to place restrictions on a business that render them unable to trade and not financially compensate them for this or only financially compensate them along with other businesses that have not faced the same harsh restrictions.

The ERF 3 could have been supportive for this sector had it been managed effectively however this was not the case. The closure of the ERF 3 within 30 hours of opening and the lack of priority for those who were more adversely affected has seen some businesses make more money from government support than they would have gained from their normal income. This is so infuriating and frustrating for those honest businesses who are struggling and who are desperately trying to keep staff employed.

I have been informed in response to a letter to Ms Kirsty Williams that £455,000 was distributed in the ERF 1, 2 and 3 to support outdoor education centres in Wales. I can also see that out of the 21 centres receiving this funding that £363,000 was allocated to one organisation. Is this figure part of the £455,000 if so this leaves approximately £4600 each for the remaining 20. A sum which would likely not cover 1 month's fixed costs. Many centres were also ineligible for these rounds of funding. Even if the one organisation getting £363,000 is not included in the £455,000 then there is a large discrepancy here in the support being offered.

Being that Outdoor education is so important to Wales' rural economies and to education. I fail to understand the reticence to support these establishments.

Residential Outdoor centres bring substantial income to the Welsh economy. They also play a large role in promoting Wales to wider parts of the UK, teaching about its history, geography, culture and language. Centres are often custodians of Wales' natural landscapes and protected spaces, taking on the role of maintenance, management and access. They also play a large part in creating a love of Wales with many children and families returning to the area throughout their lifetimes for visits and holidays.

I include a breakdown of the provision across Wales
(For the breakdown. Please see Appendix 1)

Questions:

The situation for outdoor education centres has been the same throughout the pandemic, whether in lockdown or not they cannot operate due to government restrictions. Being able to open for day activities doesn't sustain us. It is like pubs opening and not serving alcohol. Furthermore, it is simply impossible for most. We would be pleased if you would consider the following:

1. Why was support not given for the months July, Aug, Sept, Nov and only for the firebreak lockdown in October and Dec to Jan, Feb, Mar when residential outdoor Education centres faced continual restrictions? Could these payments be backdated?
2. When business come out of lockdown outdoor education centres will still not be able to operate, due to both Westminster and Welsh restrictions. Will support continue in the form of a lockdown restrictions grant until the restrictions are lifted for our sector?
3. If the job retention scheme is not continued many centres will have to make staff redundant. What provision is there to compensate for this in light of continuing restrictions. I.e. What case are the WG making for the continuation of furlough for businesses still facing restrictions? Or what provision is the WG making to support jobs in those businesses still unable to trade.

4. Will the Business Rates Relief still be available to residential outdoor education centres as long as they face restrictions.

3. After being closed for over a year many centres face “start up costs” along with costs for becoming “Covid secure”. What funding will there be to help with these costs?

4. Looking forward, residential outdoor education centres offer the Welsh Government a unique opportunity to support pupils’ recovery out of lockdown and from this pandemic. With children’s health, fitness and mental wellbeing of utmost concern, along with the need for children to reengage with learning, we suggest a government funded summer residential camp scheme utilising the skills expertise and facilities that are already on our doorstep. An opportunity for the Government to give something back to local Welsh children whilst also protecting these viable businesses and their local supply chains for the future.

Appendix 1.

NORTH WALES

| Centre Name | Area | Bed capacity |
|-----------------------|--------------------|--------------|
| FSC Rhyd-y-Creuau | Aberconwy | 80 |
| Lledr Hall | Aberconwy | 40 |
| Marle Hall | Aberconwy | 100 |
| Nant BH | Aberconwy | 55 |
| Oaklands | Aberconwy | 40 |
| Plas Y Brenin | Aberconwy | 50 |
| Towers OEC | Aberconwy | 70 |
| Anglesey Outdoors | Anglesey | 100 |
| Conwy Centre | Anglesey | 250 |
| Arete Outdoor Centre | Arfon | 100 |
| Blue Peris | Arfon | 70 |
| Boulder Adventures | Arfon | 40 |
| Kent Mountain Centre | Arfon | 50 |
| Dolawen/E3 Adventures | Arfon | 40 |
| Pentrellyncymer OEC | Clwyd West | 55 |
| Bryntysillio | Clwyd South | 65 |
| Safe and Sound | Clwyd South | ? |
| Arthog | Dwyfor Meirionnydd | 100 |
| CMC Adventure | Dwyfor Meirionnydd | 90 |
| Rhos Y Gwailau (RYG) | Dwyfor Meirionnydd | 100 |
| Plas Gwynant | Dwyfor Meirionnydd | 55 |
| Glan Llyn | Dwyfor Meirionnydd | 250 |
| Plas Caerdeon | Dwyfor Meirionnydd | 50 |
| Plas Dol y Moch | Dwyfor Meirionnydd | 60 |
| Red Ridge | Montgomeryshire | 50 |

SOUTH WALES

| Centre Name | Area | Bed capacity |
|---------------------------|-------------------|--------------|
| The Storey Arms OEC | Cardiff North | 50 |
| Park Wood Leisure | Merthyr | 50 |
| Black Mountain Adventure | Brecon and Radnor | ? |
| Woodlands | Brecon and Radnor | 50 |
| Plas Pencelli | Brecon and Radnor | 70 |
| Hilston Park | Monmouthshire | 50 |
| Gilwern | Monmouthshire | 50 |
| Trewern | South Hereford | 50 |
| Pendarren House | Brecon and Radnor | 50 |
| Hampshire Mountain Centre | Brecon and Radnor | 35 |

| | | |
|------------------|-------------------------|-----|
| Tirabad | Brecon and Radnor | 35 |
| Longtown | South Hereford | 40 |
| Stackpole Centre | Carmarthen and S. Pembs | 140 |
| Kilvrough Manor | | 50 |
| Tal Y Bont OEC | Powys | 30 |