

Update on the Outdoor Education offer in Carmarthenshire

Community Scrutiny

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Contents

1. Background	2
2. Covid impact and context	4
3. Current offer.....	5
4. Consultation: Schools Survey & Member engagement.....	6
5. Redefined purpose.....	7
6. Future options.....	8
7. Capital build / re-investment.....	9
8. Interim service / offer.....	10
9. Issues to consider: Staffing / timescales / planning / finance.....	13
10. Recommendations and next steps.....	14

1. Background

1.1 The purpose of this report is to update on Carmarthenshire County Council's current and post-covid Outdoor Education offer and to explore options for the short, medium, and long, term strategic direction for a re-modelled service within existing resources.

1.2 Carmarthenshire County Council's current Outdoor Education offer consists of:

- An on onsite offer with some off-site activity delivered from the established Pendine Outdoor Education Centre (POEC);
- Support for Llandysul Canoe Centre through the Actif Community Sports Development team;
- Specific project work undertaken within the Youth Services team in the Education department.

1.3 Pendine Outdoor Education Centre (POEC) is a large multi activity outdoor residential centre operating since the 1960's predominately for a primary school clientele. It has a maximum capacity of 120 beds. Pre pandemic, POEC had 43 residential schools' bookings in the 2019 Calendar Year: 23 were from Carmarthenshire and 20 out of County. 1,506 children stayed on a schools-based residential, of which 895 attended Carmarthenshire schools.

1.4 **Budget:** The site operates at a net controllable deficit of £188k pa (21/22 figure), however, with furlough (*to 30/9/21*), hardship funding, and minimal expenditure on food, equipment, and casual staff costs, the service does not currently operate at any greater net cost to the Council.

1.5 **Building assets:** The poor condition of the buildings at POEC is well documented, with estimates provided at circa £5-6m to re-furbish the accommodation cabins and main hall / cafeteria. Investment is needed in the both the short, medium, and long term for residential opportunities to continue. Recognising that it is unlikely that the local authority will be able to commit significant capital in this challenging financial climate, the report considers some potential options for future service provision.

1.5.1 The current configuration of the Centre consists of:

- 6 Cabins (4 main accommodation cabins, 1 shower block, 1 classroom, 1 administration / teacher accommodation block)
- Kitchen / Dining area
- Climbing Tower, High Ropes & Zip Wire
- Low ropes area
- Recreation areas including picnic area.

1.6.1 **Staffing:** Pendine has been closed to residential groups since March 2020. The implication on staff has been a mix of furlough and redeployment with the casual Instructors not being re-engaged. The site is normally staffed as follows: 1x FT Outdoor Education Centre Manager Grade M; 1x FT Senior Instructor Grade H; 1x 18.41hrs (annualised) Cook Supervisor Grade E; 1x 17.26 Hrs (annualised) Cook Grade E; (3 core and 2 catering); 1x

18Hrs (annualised) Cleaner Grade B; 1x Vacant Business Support Assistant; and normally anything up to 12 casual seasonal instructors, and one casual Catering Assistant.

1.6.2 The recruitment of specialised seasonal staff to POEC has always been highly challenging, especially with on-site staffing presence required during residential periods. The past 18-24 months with Covid creates an even greater challenge and risk in terms of staffing for the future. Many staff are questioning their desire to stay in the industry, with people having to make very real choices around making a living.

2. Covid impact and context

2.1 The restrictions put in place nationally due to Covid-19 have had a devastating effect on the outdoor education sector generally, including the careers of the seasonal instructors so integral to the business. The impact in terms of not being able to operate has probably been more significant and long-lasting on the outdoor education residential service, than any other sector. This has been well documented not just in Wales but across the UK.

2.2 Since May 2020, the Outdoor Education service has had to operate (or not) within the Welsh Government Alert levels indicated below

Alert level 4 or above - no outdoor education/learning visits

Alert level 3 – outdoor education day visits only

Alert level 2 - single occupancy residential visits – single family / bubble in one room/tent and not shared facilities

Alert level 1 - residential visits with multi-family occupancy following similar guidelines to more general indoor meeting, based around 6 families being able to interact in an indoor space e.g. a dorm. This extended to consider bubbles of 30, with potential flexibility for multi-school occupancy of a site if the provider could demonstrate satisfactory measures to maintain the integrity of a bubble.

2.3 Despite an ability to operate under some of the restrictions above, and with Wales currently at level zero with no legal restrictions but a requirement for localised risk assessments, the reality is that schools are understandably, still not ready to consider residential visits, or day trips for that matter, and it is highly unlikely that this position will continue until at least the Spring of 2022.

2.4 In the context of POEC, the national picture is both worrying and disheartening but it has also offered an opportunity to test different approaches and to reflect on the overarching purpose of the Outdoor Education Service which in turn presents new opportunities for the service through a re-modelled service strategy.

3. Current offer

3.1 **Programming:** The traditional schools programme at Pendine is a mixture of:

- Up to a full week residential Monday to Friday
- Sharing facilities with other schools (school clusters) include shared cabins, dining facilities and activity-based minibus travel.
- Onsite activities, including use of the sea and coastal strip, Climbing Tower, High and Low Ropes, and team building.
- Off-site activities including boating on a lake, bushcraft in a local wood, and `extreme stream`.
- Day out options, usually further west, by coach.
- Evening activities – Round House, Orienteering & Nature Walk.

3.2 Current non-residential options include days out to: Pen Y Fan Mountain Day, River Studies (typically Gower). The service also offers seasonal tented Expeditions to Snowdon.

3.3 **Equipment Assets:** The service also has two (9 and 17 seater) minibuses with towbars, a 4x4 and a range of outdoor equipment stored at POEC to support the above programming, including a mobile climbing tower.

3.4 **Charges:** POEC offers opportunities at a very competitive price point with a weekly charge per pupil for Carmarthenshire Schools @ £175.00 (FSM £125.00) per pupil.

3.5 Since Covid, the service has with its limited number of contracted staff (x2) been working on alternative programming and using new locations to explore new models of working. An example being the very popular Summer 2021 Outdoor offer at North Dock, Llanelli where paid paddleboarding sessions have been well supported by community and public users.

4. Consultation

4.1 A new **Regional Outdoor Partnership forum** is being established for South-West Wales, with seed funding for a Co-ordinating post to help create more opportunities for the industry and to maximise the fantastic potential from the natural land, coast and water resources we have in the area, similar to how North Wales has benefitted with the growth of its Outdoor Recreation and adrenaline activity offer. This new regional forum, backed with WG / SportWales funding will help support and shape the Outdoor Recreation and Education offer for Carmarthenshire through ongoing communication and consultation.

4.2 **Local, Scrutiny and Cabinet members** continue to be consulted. A presentation was given to the [Community Scrutiny committee on the 17th December 2020](#) to keep them updated on the current position (during Covid lockdown) and to consult and engage on some of the thinking around re-modelling the service, following on from previous site visits. The Committee unanimously supported the value of the POEC offer and the experiences it provided for school children. It whole heartedly supported the continued operation of the service to secure the service for the Wellbeing of Future Generations, supporting physical & mental health, and the personal & social development of children and younger people in particular.

4.3 **Schools Survey 2019/20**: The Outdoor Recreation team engaged with colleagues in the Education department and established a working group of headteachers to consult on the future of the service and the centre at Pendine. The feedback from this survey is helping to shape the future direction, and as a result, a new, redefined purpose is emerging for the service.

5. Redefined purpose

5.1 Based on current insights and consultation feedback, a redefined purpose is emerging for the service:

- To deliver **high quality, challenging, outdoor education opportunities**, primarily to Carmarthenshire pupils, aligned to the new Donaldson education curriculum.
- To provide a **range of residential opportunities** for children to develop their social and emotional intelligence skill whilst experiencing being away from home.
- To **deliver high quality outdoor education opportunities at a range of outdoor recreation sites and settings**, including at schools.
- To consider wider, possibly **commercial opportunities** that will help grow and sustain the Outdoor Education offer across the County of Carmarthenshire.

5.2 Whilst this new purpose isn't too far removed from the previous, what is clear is that schools want a greater variety of options and that in the short term, the use of accommodation, especially at POEC will be limited. As such, alternative delivery models are being developed and tested to offer a range of residential and non-residential activities, at different locations around the County.

6. Future Options

6.1 **Partnering with or delivering through a private / third sector operator** within or outside of Carmarthenshire. This is an option worthy of consideration, using the current revenue budget allocated for the service to subsidise the cost for Carmarthenshire schools to use alternative providers such as Morfa Bay, Llandysul Paddlers or the URDD site in Llangrannog. Tentative discussions have been held with the operators at Morfa Bay, however they already have a strong client base of users, consisting of many non-school groups or groups from outside of Carmarthenshire, and tend to charge a higher commercial rate. A partnering or commissioned service does diminish the authority's ability to shape and control the outdoor education offer and may reduce potential commercial opportunities in the future too.

6.2 CCC has many strategic landholdings and facilities across Carmarthenshire and along its coast. Opportunities exist to **maximise a commercial return from outdoor recreational activities and facilities**, given that school usage is typically limited to weekday, term time activity, thus creating opportunities for public hire and usage during peak Tourism periods at the weekend and during Spring and Summer School holiday periods. This opens up wider opportunities for the service to thrive at locations across the County, including Pendine, and across Carmarthen Bay e.g. at Pembrey Country Park or the Millennium Coastal Park possibly.

6.3 Opportunities to **link up with the new Pendine Attractor Project** are still being considered and explored. The new 44-bed residential hostel has very recently been let on a 5-year commercial lease to a private operator and is anticipated to be operational during late Summer 2022. Opportunities exist for dialogue with the new operator to explore off-peak term-time lettings to residential school groups at Pendine, to support a range of existing / new outdoor activities in the vicinity, as well as educational linkages to the new Museum of Land Speed.

6.4 **Diversifying the range and location of the Outdoor Education offer** (Residential / non-residential). Section 8 below further considers both an interim and longer-term options for the service, including residential, school or community-based activity, commercial, and online opportunities.

6.5 Developing the offer by **identifying capital receipts to re-invest in the existing site (or part of), or an alternative site(s)** is another option to consider. This option would need to be self-financing i.e. requiring little if any capital investment from CCC. The aim would be to reduce net cost of the service and / or increase income, whilst improving the facility offer both in terms of activities and residential experience.

7. Capital Build / re-investment

7.1 An asset plan for the service is critical, given that the existing POEC asset is reaching the end of its life, and this is something the service will develop over the coming months, taking account of the options outlined in section 6 of this report.

8. Interim service / offer

8.1.1 For the **period 1/10/21 to post Easter 2022**, it is proposed that the remaining small cohort of staff are redeployed as follows:

- 2x catering staff and 1x Cleaner – redeployed to local primary school catering team if feasible.

- 2x other core staff – to work on the following:
- Undertake basic maintenance / cleaning tasks at POEC, whilst also updating risk assessments with H&S team for interim and proposed activities - residential and day offer activities (0.5 days per week);
- Identify and risk assess further sites across the County where outdoor adventurous activity can be delivered (0.5 days p/w)
- Develop links with Actif Community Sport team and update website and content for Actif Anywhere online Outdoor Education offer (0.5 days p/w)
- Support the Outdoor Recreation (Country Parks) service's Winter programme if any spare capacity (0.5 days p/w);
- Develop and promote the future offer for the Outdoor Education service with all Carmarthenshire schools, also offering the school site offer below (3 days p/w). *Key to the return of residential bookings or any future bookings will be providing confidence to Schools.*

8.1.2 School on-site offer

- Cost £20/head or £25/head (transport) ex VAT.
- Capacity Max. 40
- Activities provided Mobile Climbing Tower, Problem Solving/Team Challenges

8.1.3 School off-site offer

Charges / capacities as above. Revenue Raising: £600 on a group of 30. Instructor Staff @ £100/day

- Pendine OEC: Climbing Tower & Sea/Surf
- Swiss Valley: Adventure Day – Collaboration with Llanelli Rural Council and Dwr Cymru
- North Dock – SUP / Climb Tower & Beach Investigation.
- River Study Days – Gower including minibus transport (3 lined up Oct.21)

8.1.3 The above **interim offer will be monitored monthly, with a decision by February 2022 half term on whether to recruit staff / take bookings with schools for post Easter** residential and / or other activity. *N.B. Consideration will need to be given to POEC catering and cleaning contracts at this stage too.*

8.2 Working on the basis that, schools will be willing to engage in on school site, day-trip activities, or single school bubble residential visits **post Easter 2022**, the following packages are proposed:

8.2.1 Residential offer

Pendine OEC

Full week

- Cost £178.00 ex VAT
- Capacity Max. 60
- Activities provided Watersports, Tower Activities, Team Challenges, Extreme Stream etc

Shorter stays (Mon-Wed or Wed-Fri)

- Cost £120.00 ex VAT
- Capacity Max. 60
- Activities provided 6 activity sessions – Sea, Tower, Extreme Stream, Low Ropes etc.

Residential - other

- Name of venue Llandysul Paddlers – Bunkhouse, Barn &/or camping
- Cost £120.00 ex VAT – 2 nights/3 days
 - Capacity Max. 30
 - Activities provided Watersports, Team Challenges, Bushcraft, Mapwork, Climb. Tower

Tented

- Name of venue Pembrey Country Park
- Cost £120.00 ex VAT – 2 nights/3 days
- Capacity Max. 30
- Activities provided Watersports, Team Challenges, Bushcraft, Mapwork, Climb. Tower
- F&B support Yr Orsaf

8.2.2 Day activity offer

North Dock

Proposed delivery to local primary Schools initially as well as a pilot for community use i.e.: equipment hire and coached lessons. Small wooden building behind the car park proposed as main base for activities. Linked into Actif Communities 60+ programme.

- Cost £20/head ex VAT
- Capacity Max. 40
- Activities provided Watersports & Climbing Tower,

Provisional Charging Schedule for hire and coaching

	1 Hour Hire	2 Hours Hire	3 Hours Hire
ISUP plus PFD	£15/per person	£25/per person	£35/per person
Wetsuit	£5/per person		

Coached Lesson Max. 1:4	£25/per person		
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Swiss Valley

The site is owned by Welsh Water / Dwr Cymru and licensed to Llanelli Rural Council (LRC). There is investment into the site to improve access to the water and surrounding area. A partnership has been created with the LRC to deliver opportunities to, initially, local primary schools.

- Cost £20/head ex VAT
- Capacity Max. 40
- Activities provided Canoe Journeying, Bushcraft & Mapwork

8.3 Outreach and wider partnership working

- Above also being accessed by wider community Groups, with scope for more, as follows: Guides; Seaside Youth Partnership (Delivery of grant programme for 2-3 months on a Saturday at North Dock); Coleg Sir Gar; CYCA – family support (1 day/week: awaiting confirmation on funding to launch); Education Service (Summer provision - as 2020)

8.4 Existing commercial work

- Caban SUP Shack: North Dock, Llanelli.
- SUP hire end June to end September 2021: Revenue £11.5k. Staff costs £5k

9. Issues

9.1 Short to medium term asset investments:

Essential repairs and/or replacements required on site at Pendine:

- Climbing Tower & Low Ropes – *Use mobile tower for now, whilst we look at options to procure a more 'permanent' tower and low ropes course that could be re-located to another site if needs be in future.*
- Technical Expert's Report (April '21) giving a limited lifespan to both existing structures. An essential part of the current programme for on-site residential bookings.

9.2 Health & Safety

Update risk assessments and safe working practice documents for both interim and medium term (post Easter 2022) proposed activity – with H&S team. Consider:

- Single School only onsite at any one time – maintaining integrity of the `School Bubbles`.
- Cleaning protocol for dedicated cabins (deep clean post use)
- General enhanced cleaning protocols – toilets, showers, hall, equipment, contact points etc.

9.4 Risks

- Ability to recruit experienced and qualified Instructor's post Covid – look to initiate casual recruitments from beginning of January 2022 (no contractual obligation). Work up mitigation plan if we can't recruit e.g. agency / work with other centres / adapt activities on offer to less technical / specialist / work with Outdoor Education National Governing Bodies; Work with local Schools / HE / FE sector to recruit and train up staff.
- High confidence that service can staff a program to 30 pupil half-week bookings through the whole season - lower confidence for full week program with 60+ booking numbers. Mix & Match bookings to 60 max. & min. 30
- Financial sustainability of new model of delivery – work up scenarios with Finance officer to allow for modelling with different occupancy levels, charges, and staffing ratio's.

10. Recommendations and next steps

- 10.1 Obtain feedback from Community Scrutiny 14th Dec.
- 10.2 Support interim programme to post Easter 2022 (with Feb Half-term review of staffing contract position and school residential bookings going live)
- 10.3 Redeploy staff (review catering position Feb Half-term 2022)
- 10.4 Develop offer of residential and day activity programme from Easter 2022
- 10.5 Consider recruiting casual staff / seasonals from 1st January 2022
- 10.6 Update Outdoor Education webpages to reflect new core offer (this can be added to) and create an online booking platform for offsite activities.
- 10.7 Align resources to deliver above i.e. essential maintenance works at POEC; upgrade of minibuses; purchase of any additional mobile equipment needed
- 10.8 Progress with a long term asset management plan for the service.