

Outdoor Learning Policy, Advocacy and Lobbying in Wales

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SPOTLIGHT

OUTDOOR LEARNING POLICY, ADVOCACY AND LOBBYING IN WALES



Graham French is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Education at Bangor University, Director of the Outdoor Activities PGCE course and chair of the North Wales region of AHOEC. In this article, Graham looks at the challenges of policy advocacy for outdoor learning Wales and the progress made in working with the Welsh Government and Senedd Cymru.

This article sets out to give you a brief introduction to the journey towards statutory outdoor education provision in Wales. It will also look at the associated challenges faced by researchers, practitioners and even policy makers in achieving meaningful change in the provision of outdoor learning experiences for the children and young people of Wales. It outlines two building blocks that contribute to this process of change, one of which is concerned with curriculum opportunities, whilst the other looks to bring legislative change through a member's bill in the Welsh Parliament (Senedd Cymru).

Wales first achieved a modicum of self-governance with the establishment of the Welsh Assembly and Welsh Assembly Government in 1999, as a result of a New Labour pledge when Blair and Brown resided in Downing Street. In the mid-2010s the assembly aspect of both the gathering of representatives and the government itself received further powers, meaning they could now legislate in devolved matters and, thus, they became the Welsh Parliament (more commonly known by its name in Welsh, Senedd Cymru) and the Welsh Government. From here on I will refer to the Senedd and Welsh Government (WG).

Devolution

When it comes to education, the first point of departure from Westminster governance lies in the National Curriculum, the government and the Education Minister; these are not the same in Wales. The way schools are organised and governed also differs in Wales. On the whole, schools are directly overseen by local authorities (except independent schools) and a few schools who have a bit more control of their budgets. There are, of course, independent schools too, but the vast majority of schools in Wales are accountable to their local authority and our inspectorate, Estyn (similar to OFSTED in England). There are no academies or free schools, and we haven't ever had SATS tests, league tables or the literacy hour. Our GCSE grades still run A* to G, and teacher assessment of progress was the norm even before Covid. These differences have an impact on how education policy is enacted, accountability, and the way that outdoor learning has interacted with the curriculum.

Curriculum development

Whilst adventurous activities have been part of the Curriculum for Wales since its previous incarnation in 2008, the latest edition, published in 2022, is now so different from its English counterpart that the concept of subject content is really not applicable in the same sense. The Curriculum for Wales 2022 was created in response to WG's review of the curriculum, conducted by Professor Graham Donaldson (the same person whose review of the curriculum in Scotland led to the Curriculum for Excellence). His review, titled 'Successful Futures' set out a number of recommendations for curriculum reform. WG adopted them all and embarked on a lengthy process of curriculum redesigning. Uniquely, they engaged a cross-section of schools from across the nation to do the designing and over a two-year period allowed schools to release key staff to meet regularly together to design a radically different curriculum that was centred on four purposes. These four purposes explicitly challenged the idea that the purpose of education was to leave school with as many GCSE grades

A* - C as possible and instead placed value on developing active members of society who felt empowered to function and contribute.

Four purposes of the Curriculum for Wales

"Supporting children and young people to be: Ambitious, capable learners who are ready to learn throughout their lives; Enterprising, creative contributors who are ready to play a full part in life and work; Ethical, well-informed citizens of Wales and the world; Healthy, confident individuals, ready to lead fulfilling lives as valued members of society"

As such, the curriculum was designed to be locally responsive and accept that whilst there were some things that really mattered in a subject or curriculum area, how these were explored was up to a school to match the needs of its children and resources, as well as being appropriate for its location and community. Subjects with significant cross-over in pedagogical approaches and knowledge bases were

grouped in Areas of Learning and Experience (AoLEs) and whilst this did not mean the end of traditional subjects (there are still GCSEs in these subjects), it was designed to foster a more holistic, cross-curricular approach more often seen in foundation learning. The Curriculum for Wales was available for consultation in January 2020 where many thousands of responses to the consultation were addressed and there were some significant changes – not least the inclusion of specific direction to utilise the outdoors to support learning in the humanities where children 'should be given opportunities to learn outside...'. Many outdoor learning organisations and concerned individuals submitted responses, and the Wales Council for Outdoor Learning had the opportunity to work directly with the civil servant facilitating the humanities AoLE development team of teachers. Thus, the Curriculum for Wales now allows a greater freedom of choice in curriculum design to teachers and presents opportunities to engage in outdoor learning. Where previously teachers may have found restrictions in prescriptive curriculum content and traditional pedagogies, there is now space and time to design outdoor learning into the curriculum for those that choose to. Of course, that presents training and development needs for teachers.

Although there are commercial providers offering high quality professional development, there are equally many free-to-access training programmes and resources, facilitated by bodies such as Natural Resources Wales (NRW). NRW has a team of education officers who run programmes of professional development for teachers and facilitate regional outdoor learning networks for teachers to meet regularly, share effective practice and gain support. NRW has an education aim as one of its core purposes. This has led to productive relationships with outdoor learning professional organisations, such as the Association of Heads of Outdoor Education Centres (AHOEC), enabling sustainable access to lakes, rivers, forests, crags, gorges and mines on its land for the purposes of education. A community-centred, free to low-cost approach to professional development in the outdoors has provided opportunities to support teachers as they exercise some of their new curriculum design freedom and venture further outside the classroom.

Legislative change

The second component of this journey to seek statutory outdoor learning in Wales runs parallel to the curriculum reforms detailed above. As I've already explained, Senedd Cymru has legislative powers in devolved matters and education is one of these devolved issues. There are 60 members of the Senedd and the small size and relative youth of devolution mean that members are more accessible than their colleagues in Westminster. Soon after our last (Senedd) election, Outdoor Alliance Wales (OAW), a collaboration of a wide range of organisations in the wider outdoor adventure sector (so not all/only concerned with education), was instrumental in the formation of a Senedd cross-party group (CPG) on outdoor adventure. This group, whilst similar to the APPG in Westminster (see Horizons #102 for more on the Westminster APPG) is open to people beyond Senedd members and gave further access to at least one Senedd member from the three major parties (Labour, Conservative and Plaid Cymru). The wide-ranging membership of this group, brought about through the advocacy work of OAW, has prompted opportunities to present to government ministers on climate change, access to open spaces (including water) and education. The Senedd members attending meetings were clearly concerned with the outdoors and, whilst they did not present a direct conduit to WG, they have allowed the wider outdoor adventure sector to inform other Senedd members (through them) and have questions asked on the floor of the Senedd in various debates.

Utilising this growing understanding of the wider outdoor adventure sector, we approached the chair of the CPG, Sam Rowlands (Member of the Senedd), with a proposal to put forward a members' bill on outdoor education which focussed on offering funded residential outdoor education courses for the children and young people of Wales. Recent research, commissioned by WG that I had the privilege to lead on, demonstrated that teachers valued learning outdoors and its impact on both the health and wellbeing of the children and staff, and the opportunities it presented to engage and motivate children. However, it also highlighted the lack of consistency in both quality and offering across the 22 local authorities of Wales. There were some early indications of a correlation between those local authorities with more of the most deprived areas (according to the Welsh index of multiple

deprivation) and it was clear that the financial cost of outdoor education residential work was one of the main hurdles faced by school leaders and teachers when embedding outdoor education in their curriculum.

The first step was to write an outline proposal which would enter a selection process with the range of other members' bill proposals, of which one would be selected to take forward and allocated Senedd researcher time and time for debate in the Senedd by members. The proposed Outdoor Education (Wales) Bill was selected from this process as the one idea that could be worked upon in the following month. We had little time to work on the next step – an explanatory memorandum which would inform members' decisions on whether to allow further parliamentary time and resources to develop a full bill. Thus, Sam Rowlands and I, alongside some of the Senedd research team, worked hard to prepare the memorandum with enough information for members, whilst trying to give leeway for the future development of the bill and maintaining progress already made. Colleagues from the Outdoor Education Advisory Panel (OEAP) Cymru, AHOEC and the OAW were integral in this process, in subsequent media work and in garnering organisational support for the bill. The OAW were vital in demonstrating the wide range and large number of organisations who supported the bill, demonstrating the power of a shared voice with many organisations coming together in the alliance.



The Senedd debated the proposed bill on the 26th October 2022 and then voted on whether to give Sam and the team leave to proceed (devoting more Senedd time and resources, both human and financial) to working the initial proposal and memorandum into a full bill which fit in the Welsh legal framework concerning education. The debate was available to view live online (and is still there as an archive) and it was pleasing to hear all the members who spoke recount strong and positive memories of their time as young people in the outdoors or on residential visits. During the debate it was clear that many members supported the idea of the proposed bill, but some in government felt that it was too costly to implement, so voted against it. However, the result of the debate and vote on the proposed bill was successful in gaining leave to proceed by one vote, and from that point there were a further 13 months to research further and develop the proposal into a full bill.

Once written, the bill itself needs to move through the committee phase, before a final debate and vote in the Senedd, hopefully early next year (2024). As the Outdoor education (Wales) Bill makes its way through the Senedd towards a final vote, the work with WG on outdoor learning continues. If the bill passes, this will ensure that financial circumstances are not a barrier to the children and young people of Wales benefiting from residential outdoor education as an integral part of the curriculum. If the bill doesn't pass, the profile of outdoor learning has still been raised so that many more teachers in Wales will seek out the resources (handily available through Hwb) to deliver high quality outdoor learning (as they can in their self-designed curriculum), presenting further opportunities for the children and young people of Wales to learn outdoors ▲