

Wiltshire Council

Children's Select Committee

31 October 2017

Report of the rapid scrutiny exercise:

Review of Outdoor Education

Purpose of the report

1. To present the findings and recommendations of the rapid scrutiny exercise on the review of outdoor education and to seek endorsement.

Background

2. The Rapid Scrutiny (RS) met to consider 'Traded Services to Schools' and the 'Review of Outdoor Education' on 13 September 2017. However, it was resolved that the Group would need to reconvene to conclude the exercise on the 'Review of Outdoor Education' and that the topic around 'Traded Services for Schools' would require an Overview and Scrutiny (O&S) task group. The full report from 13 September 2017 meeting can be accessed [here](#).
3. The membership of the first RS on 13 September comprised Cllrs Anna Cuthbert, Trevor Carbin, Jon Hubbard and Mr John Hawkins, a co-opted member of the Children's Select Committee. Due to the fact that the RS needed to conclude its exercise in a timely fashion, a limited number of dates were available for the second meeting and this meant that for the second meeting on 18 October 2017, the membership of the Group comprised Cllr Jon Hubbard and Mr John Hawkins only.
4. As the previous RS Chairman, Cllr Anna Cuthbert, was unable to attend the second 18 October meeting, it was agreed that Cllr Jon Hubbard would act as Chairman for this segment of the RS exercise.
5. The RS received evidence from the following: Cllr Laura Mayes, Cabinet Member for Children, Education and Skills; Cllr Philip Whalley, Portfolio Holder for Education and Skills; Nick Cave, Interim Traded Services Manager; Liz Williams, Head of Finance and Michael Hudson, Associate Director for Finance. Terence Herbert, Corporate Director for Children and Education, was unable to attend the 18 October meeting and supported the meeting continuing in his absence.
6. As previously discussed at the 13 September meeting, further information was required by the RS on the historic data of the decline in bookings coupled with the increase in costs over the previous three years, in order to fully conduct a rapid scrutiny on the review of outdoor education (please see above report link). With this in mind, the RS considered the following evidence:

- A report on the key issues surrounding the Oxenwood Outdoor Education Centre
- A PowerPoint presentation on the Review of Outdoor Education in Wiltshire
- Several additional items of evidence were presented at the meeting, mainly around the prices charged by neighbouring outdoor education sites, the capacity of the two sites under review, sustainability modelling for the two sites under review, client usage of the two sites under review between April 2016 and May 2017 and photographs of the accommodation provision at Oxenwood.

Summary of Discussions

7. The Oxenwood outdoor education site requires significant capital investment to be competitive. For example, it has limited facilities in terms of its activity provision and the centre design means that there is not adequate space for one day courses to be delivered at the same time as residential courses. Additionally, the nearby woodland used by the centre belongs to a separate landowner and only a verbal agreement has been reached between Oxenwood and the proprietor for Oxenwood's usage of this area, yet this is deemed to mean that Oxenwood's reliance on this space cannot be seen as secure.
8. One of Oxenwood's competitive points is that it is one of the cheapest providers of outdoor education within the South West region. However, to fund the increasing capital investment that the centre requires, the centre has had to progressively increase its prices over recent years and will need to continue to do so. It is therefore felt that Oxenwood could lose its competitive edge within the wider market in the near future.
9. Oxenwood's most popular course is the three day/two-night residential programme and data demonstrates that its peak season is between May and June. Around 760 bookings per month would mean that the centre is at full capacity and, during the peak season, the centre obtained 531 bookings during May and June 2017. This shows that during its optimum period, utilisation is just under 70%. However, there are also months when no bookings have been recorded, for example during December.
10. The rapid scrutiny were surprised that the council did not appear to have ongoing management data that reported income/expenditure and utilisation of the Oxenwood centre in previous years.
11. It was suggested that a capital investment of around £200,000 was required in order to help ensure that Oxenwood maintains a competitive standard. The RS felt that this would equate to an annual revenue payment of around £27,000; which would see Oxenwood take on a deficit of around £40,000 per annum.

12. Taking the above figures, if the most popular programme at Oxenwood costs £136 per pupil for the three day-two night residency, then the RS believed that Oxenwood would require around 270 pupil visits to break even. Therefore, with an average school party of approximately 25, the RS felt this would mean that the centre would need to sell the above programme to 11 more groups of 25; this would then equate to the annual revenue payment of £27,000 being funded.
13. The second outdoor education site under review could be considered to have advantages over the Oxenwood site; namely because it is easily accessible, is able to attract a greater range of customers and as it has the ability to be more flexible when it comes to providing activities.
14. Neighbouring outdoor education providers follow different pricing structures, for example, they may increase their prices during the peak season and would then decrease their prices during other parts of the year. The two outdoor education sites under review only marginally follow this model.
15. As an example, Somerset's outdoor education centres charge customers more money than the two Wiltshire sites under review. In order to accurately consider this data, an indication would be needed around what these alternative sites provide for the customer.
16. The Council is currently unaware of any reviews of outdoor education taking place in neighbouring authorities and thus feels that further consultation with schools is required in order to fully review outdoor education in Wiltshire. For this reason, it was suggested that an O&S task group be established to consider the wider commercial policy around how the Council reviews its outdoor education.

Conclusions

17. The RS sought to adopt an evidenced-led approach, as the role of O&S is to act as a critical friend to the Executive. The RS had previously asked for specific information to be provided in order to effectively conduct a full rapid scrutiny exercise and received assurance this would be provided. However, this was not done in a timely manner and was therefore unable to be considered appropriately. Primarily, the Group were unable to consider an accurate blueprint of the utilisation of the centre and this contributed to the fact that an evidenced-led verdict could not be reached.
18. At the close of this RS, the Group are not convinced that the Council has adequately explored the possibility that minimal investment in the facilities at Oxenwood and suitable marketing could not produce a surplus generating facility within the county. Unfortunately with the lack of evidence presented to

the RS, the Group felt unable to explore the centre's viability subject any further.

19. There could be merit in having a task group focus on the wider policy of how Wiltshire could review its outdoor education. Indeed, the RS felt that there would be benefit to the Council applying a holistic approach to how it reviews its outdoor education, yet the RS resolved that Children's Select Committee (the parent Committee) ought to have a discussion around whether such a Task Group would be appropriate at this time.

Recommendations

20. The RS felt unable to draw a sufficient conclusion and recommendation as to the future of Oxenwood, as the evidence required to perform the exercise was not provided and certain key pieces of information were only relayed during the latter half of 18 October 2017 meeting.
21. Children's Select Committee is asked to consider whether it wishes to establish a task group, to support the development of an outdoor education provision policy, in light of further views that might be expressed at the Committee.

Cllr Jon Hubbard (Chairman, Rapid Scrutiny – Review of Outdoor Education)

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