

## **Wiltshire Council**

### **Children's Select Committee**

**10 March 2020**

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## **Final Report of the Traded Services for Schools and Outdoor Education Task Group – Outdoor Education**

### **Purpose of the report**

1. To present the findings and recommendations of the task group (TG) on Outdoor education for endorsement by the committee and referral to the Cabinet Member for response.

### **Background**

2. At the 13 June 2017 meeting of the Children's Select Committee, Cllr Laura Mayes, (then) Cabinet Member for Children, Education and Skills asked if the Committee would consider looking into Traded Services for Schools.
3. Two Rapid Scrutiny exercises were undertaken on 13 September and 18 October 2017. The findings from these two meetings were respectively reported to the Overview and Scrutiny Management Select Committee on 26 September 2017 (access report [here](#)) and Children's Select Committee on 31 October 2017 ([link to report and minutes](#)).
4. The outcome of the rapid scrutiny exercises was the recommendation to establish a Traded Services for Schools task group, which would perform a separate piece of scrutiny on Outdoor Education. The TG started its work in February 2018.

### **Terms of reference**

5. The following terms of reference were approved by Children's Select Committee on 17 April 2018:
  - (1) To review the proposed developments for traded services to schools, considering the outcomes of the service review of traded services (commenced in October 2016), with a particular focus on the following areas:
    - a) The model for the centralised trading unit and the proposed traded services team structure and appointments to ensure sustainability and quality of service;
    - b) The cost of services that are currently provided against projected costs to ensure value for money;
    - c) The plans for marketing to ensure continuous take-up;
    - d) The current policy;
    - e) How traded services will be future-proofed.

(2) To review and comment on the Cabinet report regarding the proposals for the future of outdoor education in Wiltshire, with particular focus on the evidence-based analysis that led to the options presented within the report. Comments from the TG will be presented to Cabinet at the same meeting at which the report is considered (currently scheduled for 27 March 2018).

6. Subsequently the following additional term of reference was approved by Children's Services Committee on 4 September 2018:

- (3) To review and comment on:
- a) the Council's advertising of the two outdoor education sites (Braeside and Oxenwood);
  - b) the Council's consideration of expressions of interest, including evaluation criteria and weighting;
  - c) the report to Cabinet presenting the findings on the expressions of interests (bids).

### **Membership**

7. The membership of the two Rapid Scrutiny exercises transferred to the task group, except for Cllr Anna Cuthbert who had to resign from the TG due to conflicting work commitments:
- Mr John Hawkins, Chairman of the TG
  - Cllr Trevor Carbin
  - Cllr Jon Hubbard
  - Cllr Tony Jackson

### **Methodology**

8. The TG held 14 meetings.
9. The task group's preliminary findings and recommendations were shared with the executive and officers of the council.

### **Timeline**

10. The TG met on 7 February 2018 to consider the draft report of the findings of the traded services' review of Outdoor Education, to be presented to Cabinet on 27 March 2018. The TG made a number of recommendations to Cabinet; primarily for Cabinet to defer a decision on the closure of the centres until further information could be obtained ([link to report](#)).
11. The Cabinet at its meeting on the 27 March 2018 considered a review of outdoor education facilities. Outdoor education is a non-statutory function of the Council and to avoid significant medium to long term costs Cabinet at that meeting decided that both the Braeside and Oxenwood Outdoor Education Centres would close on the 31 August 2018.

12. The decision made by Cabinet on 27 March 2018 relating to Outdoor Education was subject to a Call-in, which was considered at the meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee held on 10 April 2018 ([link to reports and minutes](#)).
13. On 10 April 2018, the Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee resolved that *“On balance of the written and oral evidence presented, to find that there were insufficient grounds to demonstrate that the principles of decision making had not been followed by the Cabinet in this case, and therefore the decision can be implemented with immediate effect.”*
14. Following the decision made by Cabinet on 27 March 2018, the Council received representations from the public and community groups and contact by organisations expressing an interest in continuing the operation of the centres as an outdoor education facility. The publicity generated by the call-in process and petition regarding the closure of the centres generated sufficient interest from outside bodies for the council to conduct a soft market testing exercise to explore the interest further.
15. Full Council received a petition on 22 May 2018, which had received over 16,000 signatures, and which requested that the outdoor education centres in Braeside and Oxenwood not be closed. Council made three recommendations, including *“that social impacts should be considered equally with financial impacts, and that the Cabinet use every best effort to ensure the two sites will remain in use for outdoor education”* ([link to petition and minutes](#)).
16. Cabinet at its 12 June 2018 meeting resolved to keep the centres open until Christmas 2018 and to commence a formal bidding process. The aim was to market the sites as going concerns to explore any viable alternatives to complete closure of the services ([link to report and minutes](#)).
17. Cabinet on 11 December 2018 considered the outdoor education bids, including a report from the task group, which was also considered by Children’s Select Committee on 8 January 2019 ([link to report and minutes](#)).

### **Evidence Gathering**

18. The TG met on 7 February 2018 to consider the draft report of the findings of the traded services’ review of Outdoor Education, to be presented to Cabinet on 27 March 2018.
19. The TG resolved to undertake site visits of the two council-owned outdoor education centres, and consequently visited Braeside and Oxenwood (thereafter named “the centres”) on 27 February 2018.
20. The TG is grateful to the following witnesses who contributed to its review of Outdoor Education:

Keith Browning	(formerly) Centre Manager, Braeside Education & Conference Centre
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Nick Cave	(formerly) Interim Traded Services Director
David Clarke	(formerly) Head of School Effectiveness Commissioning, Performance and School Effectiveness
Tom Davies	(formerly) Deputy Centre Manager, Oxenwood
Cllr Laura Mayes	(formerly) Cabinet Member for Children, Education and Skills
Yousaf Mirza	(formerly) Head of Education, Braeside Education & Conference Centre
Mal Munday	(formerly) Head of Service, Support and Safeguarding, Early Help
Ed Plank	(formerly) Centre Manager, Oxenwood
Alan Stubbersfield	(formerly) Interim Director Education & Skills AM, Education and Skills
Cllr Philip Whalley	(formerly) Portfolio Holder for Education and Skills
Cllr Philip Whitehead	(formerly) Cabinet Member for Finance, Procurement, Transformation and Operational Assets
Elizabeth Williams	(formerly) Head of Finance Care, Finance & Procurement

21. The TG met on 17 October 2018 to consider the bids that had been received to date by the Council with regards to the potential sale of Braeside and Oxenwood.
22. The TG resolved to undertake a visit of the Lackham site (Wiltshire College and University Centre), in the same way it had undertaken site visits of Braeside and Oxenwood, to better understand how outdoor education would be provided on site.
23. The TG is grateful to the following witnesses who contributed to its Lackham site visit on 9 November 2018:

Adrian Ford	Deputy Principal, Corporate Resources
Tony Basham	Director of Business and Partnership
Julie Haslett	Campus facilities co-ordinator for Lackham

24. The TG also met on 7 November 2018 to consider the draft Cabinet report on preferred bidders for the centres ahead of its consideration by Cabinet on 11 December 2018.
25. Throughout 2019 and early 2020, the TG carried on receiving updates on the transfers until these were completed for Oxenwood (1 October 2019) and Braeside (1 February 2020), including the decision by Wiltshire College not to pursue its bid for Braeside and the council's subsequent selection of Classes Abroad as its preferred bidder for Braeside.

## Conclusions

26. The task group's conclusions and key findings on Outdoor Education can be found in the task group's reports presented to Cabinet as follows, and are therefore not repeated in this report:
  - a) Cabinet on 27 March 2018 – closure of centres - [link to report](#);

- b) Cabinet on 11 December 2018 (also considered by Children's Select Committee on 8 January 2019) - preferred bidders - [link to report and minutes](#).
27. The TG would like to express its gratitude at the opportunity it was given to be informed of the bids ahead of a decision being made by Cabinet on preferred bidders (TG meeting on 7 November 2018), as well as all other efforts made by the Executive to inform the TG of all the work undertaken, issues faced and milestones reached to complete the transfers.
  28. As reflected in the task group's report presented to Cabinet on 27 March 2018, the TG had always believed that the opportunities offered to children and young people in Wiltshire through the two centres should not be lost, although it accepted that this may no longer be offered directly by the council.
  29. The TG is therefore delighted at the outcome reached with regards to the provision of outdoor education in Wiltshire and would like to recognise the quality and thoroughness of the work and dedication of the Cabinet Members and officers involved, in particular Paul Redford, Head of Traded Services.
  30. The TG would urge councillors to ensure that schools and community groups in their areas are aware of the services on offer at the centres from the new providers, Classes Abroad ([Braeside website](#)) and Community First ([Oxenwood website](#)). (*Recommendation 1*)

## **Proposal**

31. To thank the (former) Cabinet Member for Finance, Procurement, Transformation and Operational Assets for his engagement with the task group.
32. To congratulate and thank the (former) Cabinet Member for Finance, Procurement, Transformation and Operational Assets and all officers involved for completing the transfers for Braeside and Oxenwood.
33. To recognise and pay tribute to the professionalism, dedication and enthusiasm of the staff at Braeside and Oxenwood who carried on delivering a service through a period of uncertainty.
34. To note and endorse the task group's reports presented to Cabinet on 27 March 2018 and 11 December 2018 and the key findings and recommendations within the reports.
35. To endorse the report of the TG and refer it to the Cabinet Member for Children, Education and Skills for response at the Committee's next meeting.

## **Recommendations**

**The task group recommends that the Cabinet Member for Children, Education and Skills;**

- (1) Ensures that all councillors are aware of the offer at Braeside and Oxenwood (councillors briefing note, elected wire – scrutiny story of the week, etc.) (paragraph 30) *to raise awareness of the centres having remained operational.***
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**Mr John Hawkins, Chairman of the Traded Services for Schools and Outdoor Education Task Group**

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## **Appendices**

None

## **Background documents**

None