

Dear First Minister,

We are writing to highlight the current plight of outdoor education providers across Wales. The severity of current government guidance and the lack of targeted support is now taking the industry to crisis point.

On the 16th March 2020, residential education centres closed their doors to children and young people from across the UK. ***Unlike many sectors of the economy, Department for Education and Welsh Government regulations have prevented us from reopening at any stage since.***

As well as an estimated £40 million in lost annual revenue, there have been approximately 500,000 pupil bed nights lost across the period. For many this was their one opportunity to engage in the positive and often life changing world of outdoor education.

Despite having put in place Covid-safe protection measures, our doors remain closed to business. They also remain closed to the myriad employment opportunities within local areas, ***creating a long-lasting impact upon the strength and vibrancy of Welsh communities***: Cooks, managers, cleaners, outdoor practitioners, trainees and apprentices, site staff, equipment and food suppliers, electricians, plumbers and builders; the list goes on and the connections run deep.

Unfortunately, 15% of our centres have been forced to shut, with many more under immediate threat. Once closed, these valuable assets never reopen to future generations. They leave a permanent hole in local communities and national educational provision. ***The industry is facing the most serious existential threat in its history.*** It is not inconceivable that current UK governments are now overseeing the final throes of a long established and much-loved set of national institutions.

Now, more than ever, the nation needs a strong specialist sector with the skill sets to create positive, life changing developmental opportunities for young people. The effect the pandemic and its control measures are having on the mental and physical health of our school populations is well recognised at all levels of society. The outdoor education industry has the infrastructure and intellectual capacity to play a fundamental part in the reset and recovery process. Resilience, self-confidence, independence and social interaction are our stock in trade, as well as the ability to provide context and vital support for mainstream educational practice.

Whilst we recognise that government funding to local authorities created breathing space for some centres, this did not benefit all and did nothing to help independent providers. For them, there has been no targeted support for the period of closure. The situation will become more critical when funding for LEA centres in England and Wales ends on 31st March. Scotland and Northern Ireland provided £3 million of funding specifically for their Outdoor Education industry, ***which raises a question regarding the importance your government places upon educational provision.***

The question now remains, will the Welsh government recognise the essential role the sector will play as a part of the post-Covid recovery solution, or will it allow the decline of quality educational provision for this and future generations? The sector desperately needs both targeted financial support and constructive dialogue with government to enable it to survive the coming months and years.