

# NORTH YORKSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL EXECUTIVE

21 September 2021

## Outdoor Learning Service Strategic Review

Report of the Corporate Director – Children and Young People’s Service

### 1.0 PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

- 1.1 To report on the review of the Outdoor Learning Service
- 1.2 To ask the Executive to recommend to the Chief Executive Officer that he use his emergency delegated powers to approve the recommendations in section 11.

### 2.0 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 2.1 Under his delegated decision making powers in the Officers’ Delegation Scheme in the Council’s Constitution, the Chief Executive Officer has power, in cases of emergency, to take any decision which could be taken by the Council, the Executive or a committee. Following on from the expiry of the Local Authorities and Police and Crime Panels (Coronavirus) (Flexibility of Local Authority and Police and Crime Panel Meetings) (England and Wales) Regulations 2020, which allowed for committee meetings to be held remotely, the County Council resolved at its meeting on 5 May 2021 that, for the present time, in light of the continuing Covid-19 pandemic circumstances, remote live-broadcast committee meetings should continue (as informal meetings of the Committee Members), with any formal decisions required being taken by the Chief Executive Officer under his emergency decision making powers and after consultation with other Officers and Members as appropriate and after taking into account any views of the relevant Committee Members.
- 2.2 In February 2021, the Executive approved a strategic review of the Outdoor Learning Service and asked for recommendations resulting from the strategic review be presented to the Executive later in the year.
- 2.3 The service operates two outdoor learning centres, at Bewerley Park and East Barnby, providing residential courses, day-based activities and staff training. North Yorkshire has provided outdoor pursuits, education and learning for children and young people for over 80 years, with the forerunner of current outdoor education and learning service starting in 1974.
- 2.4 The strategy for children and young people living in North Yorkshire “Being Young in North Yorkshire 2021 – 2024” has a vision that all children and young people are safe, happy, healthy and able to achieve in North Yorkshire. The Outdoor Learning Service makes a valuable contribution to meeting this vision.
- 2.5 This work also supports the Council Plan 2021 – 2025 priority to “enable more children and young people to lead lifelong healthy lifestyles with improved social, emotional and mental health and resilience, and reduced health inequalities”.
- 2.6 This report summarises the findings of the outdoor learning review and proposes the next steps for the service.

### 3.0 REVIEW OF THE OUTDOOR LEARNING SERVICE

- 3.1 A strategic review of the Outdoor Learning Service has been undertaken. This has included desk-based research and analysis, extensive stakeholder engagement and property inspections.

## Desk Based Research

- 3.2 Investigation of the evidence around the benefits to young people of outdoor learning was undertaken. The Paul Hamlyn Foundation (2015) concludes that research has shown that a residential learning experience provides opportunities, benefits and impacts that cannot be achieved in any other educational context or setting.
- 3.3 The Education Endowment Fund, a national charity dedicated to breaking the link between family income and educational achievement, states that studies of adventure learning interventions consistently show positive benefits on academic learning. On average, pupils who participate in adventure learning interventions make approximately four months' additional progress. There is also evidence of an impact on non-cognitive outcomes such as self-confidence.
- 3.4 In 19/20, the two outdoor learning centres provided outdoor residential visits to over 6,700 children from 170 different schools with an average length of stay of 2.8 nights. In total 78% of pupils are from schools within North Yorkshire. Furthermore, 82% of customers are school children - the other 18% are made up of other groups (7%), individuals (staff training) (5%), and others such as overnight placements for children through No Wrong Door (6%).
- 3.5 Occupancy during weekday term time averages at 52% at East Barnby and 34% at Bewerley Park. Occupancy is lower at Bewerley Park due to the large dormitories and the lack of flexibility this offers to accommodate multiple schools where there are smaller groups.
- 3.6 Demand is highest in June and September, during the week, in term time. The centres are at a lower capacity at other times, including over the winter months, at weekends and during school holidays.
- 3.7 The service structure doesn't currently have any dedicated marketing resource which limits the opportunities for increasing bookings and maximising occupancy throughout the year. Ad hoc booking arrangements with non-school groups provide some opportunities to increase income.
- 3.8 The service has lacked the resource to be able to access grant funding; there is further potential for the service to bid into local and regional schemes and to encourage schools to spend some of their elective funding such as pupil premium, sport premium or the catch-up funding with the service.
- 3.9 The income into the service each year is typically circa £2.2million. This includes residential income (circa £2 million), outreach income (£140K) and tenancy income (£14K).
- 3.10 Whilst the service has, overall, incurred a deficit in some years and has come close to breaking-even in other years, the issue remains that there are growing maintenance requirements..
- 3.11 To demonstrate the service can operate efficiently with a commercial ethos, each centre also needs to make a contribution to corporate overheads, as well as service overheads, to ensure that the reported financial position reflects a full cost recovery operation.
- 3.12 The centres resumed day visits in June 2021 and 1,828 children attended from 91 schools which generated an income of £72.5K over a six-week period.
- 3.13 The centres are restarting residential visits from September 2021. The current bookings are approximately 15% lower than previous years, 129 bookings for over 5,000 pupils with an estimated income of £1,466K, however, bookings always increase throughout the school year, so this is expected to increase once schools re-open.

- 3.14 Information relating to the other Outdoor Education Centres and Outdoor Activity Centres in North Yorkshire and the surrounding areas was gathered from information available on the internet.
- 3.15 There are eight Outdoor Education/Activity Centres within North Yorkshire, four are local authority operated (red markers) - two for each North Yorkshire County Council and Bradford Metropolitan Council. The other four are managed as a charity, trust or community interest company (blue markers). There are currently no privately run centres within the boundary of North Yorkshire; the nearest which are most used by North Yorkshire schools are Robinwood, with sites in Todmorden and Cumbria, Kingswood with sites in Sheffield and Doncaster and High Adventure, near Skipton.



- 3.16 PGL have purchased Newby Wiske Hall just outside of Northallerton and plan to operate this as a private children's activity centre.
- 3.17 When considering the top ten centres for outdoor activity visits by schools in North Yorkshire in 18/19, as recorded in the Evolve system:
- 49% go to North Yorkshire Centres (East Barnby and Beverley Park)
  - 28% go to independent centres within North Yorkshire (Marrick Priory, Carlton Lodge, Peat Rigg and Low Mill)
  - 23% go to private centres outside North Yorkshire (Robinwood, Kingswood and High Adventure)
- 3.18 The charge for a 5 day / 4 night residential at East Barnby or Beverley Park is competitive with the other local providers.
- 3.19 North Yorkshire Outdoor Learning Service offers a wide range of adventurous real-world activities that are included in the overall price. The focus is on learning and outcomes, with the programme designed around the objectives discussed with schools/groups prior to the visit.
- 3.20 Teaching staff are responsible for the safe operation of the activity programme and are required to undertake dynamic risk assessments of the conditions at the point of delivery.
- 3.21 Private providers such as PGL run an Outdoor Activity Centre, with mostly on-site artificial activities which are lower risk.

- 3.22 All the staff in the outdoor learning service with the exception of the Business Support team work directly for the outdoor learning service, within the Education and Skills area, as the service has always been teacher led and managed.
- 3.23 The review found that the challenges for the staff were:
- Managers are responsible for a diverse range of things
  - Gaps in experience and training in business and marketing
  - Many roles have a range of extra tasks (not always grade appropriate) which reduce their time to concentrate on core activities
  - Staff are required to work on days when there are no visits taking place
  - Lack of resource to market the business and attract funding
  - Lack of whole service approach to directing resources
- 3.24 The different types of organisational form, and the pros and cons of each model, were provided by consultants Bevan Brittan.
- 3.25 Feedback from schools say they value the service being part of the council and the assurance that this gives to the customers.
- 3.26 A key objective of the service, which was highly valued in the stakeholder feedback, is the focus on teaching and learning and this ethos is consistent with the service management through the Education and Skills department within the Council.
- 3.27 A different organisational form may assist the service to move to a more commercial ethos and could raise additional income.
- 3.28 There would need to be significant investment of time and resource to transition to any other organisational form and there are no immediate benefits identified in relation to finance or access to grants which would support moving away from the current council run model at this time.

#### Stakeholder Engagement

- 3.29 A questionnaire was sent to all schools within North Yorkshire and other schools and groups who have historically used the service; 182 responses were received which is a response rate of 52%.
- 3.30 A user group was established with representatives from primary and secondary schools from across North Yorkshire. This group met on a number of occasions and provided a forum for frank and useful discussion. A representative from the user group sat on the Project Board.
- 3.31 The public were invited to email their views to an email account dedicated to the review. Any member of the public who emailed was also invited to submit their views through a questionnaire.
- 3.32 The view of the staff employed by the service were gathered through a questionnaire, online workshops and confidential face to face meetings with small groups of staff that took place at both sites.
- 3.33 Amanda Newbold, Assistant Director for Educations and Skills, attended meetings of Bewerley Parish Council, Pateley Bridge Town Council and Mickleby Parish Council to update local Councillors and gather their views.
- 3.34 All primary schools in North Yorkshire were invited to participate in an art project where their pupils could draw their ideal Outdoor Education Centre. The resulting 200 drawings were combined into a collage that illustrates what primary age children value about the service.

- 3.35 A number of meetings were held with other organisations and partners such as North Yorkshire Sport and the headteachers' and governors' networks to invite their views.
- 3.36 All stakeholder groups valued the Outdoor Learning Service and felt that the outdoor learning experience was valuable for the children and young people of North Yorkshire.
- 3.37 The comments and observations of all groups of stakeholders have informed and supported the findings presented in this report.
- 3.38 81% percent of respondents to the user questionnaire had used the service in the last 3-4 years. Of those who did not use the service, 37% stated that they currently use another provider and 18% said the quality of accommodation/facilities was the reason.
- 3.39 For day provision and staff training courses, the main reason given by those who did not use the service was they were not aware of the offer 35% and 55% respectively.
- 3.40 Stakeholders rated the following, beyond the activities, as either essential or very important from and Outdoor Learning Service: learning to manage risk (81%), social and emotional skills (78%) and appreciation of the natural environment (63%).
- 3.41 When asked about facilities, dedicated bathrooms areas for staff (62%) and indoor social space (57%) were rated either essential or very important.
- 3.42 In a separate piece of engagement with secondary schools in the Scarborough Borough, when asked what interventions they thought would improve the attainment of disadvantaged children to help them to achieve their potential, outdoor adventure learning was rated highest in the list.

#### Property

- 3.43 The Property Service, along with consultants Align Property Partners, visited both sites between April and June 2021.
- 3.44 East Barnby site consists of 24 separate buildings and was built in the 1950s as an RAF site, the buildings are a prefabricated construction.
- 3.45 Bewerley Park consists of a total of 31 separate buildings, it was built in the 1940's and buildings are primarily wooden with the exception of 3 bungalows which currently house staff and trainee instructors.
- 3.46 Bewerley Park is owned by North Yorkshire County Council. East Barnby is leased from 2018 to 2043 with breakpoints in 2023, 2028, 2033 and 2038.
- 3.47 The buildings across both sites comprise classrooms, administrative, dormitory, staff accommodation and other spaces. These properties are characterised as being thermally inefficient and inappropriately configured to meet the requirements of service delivery and current expectations for, for example, safeguarding.
- 3.48 The Bewerley Park site requires significant investment to maintain and improve the facilities. The design and layout of the current buildings do not meet the demands and function required by a modern outdoor education centre.
- 3.49 Maintenance costs have reduced over the last 6 years. This is mainly due to a reduction in planned maintenance works. However, these are still high: £116,000 in 19/20.

3.50 From stakeholder feedback and the property inspections undertaken by the Property Service, along with consultants Align Property Partners, the priorities for property were identified as:-

#### **East Barnby**

- Lack of dedicated bathrooms for visiting staff, the toilet and shower facilities are shared with the children, which requires careful management.
- Visiting staff bedrooms are very small and shared, in some cases special beds have been made which are not full length or width. Uncomfortable and inadequate bedrooms can discourage staff from booking visits.
- Loss of heat from buildings due to lack of insulation/double glazing makes heating the buildings expensive and contributes to high carbon emissions.
- No drying room/storage for wet coats/shoes, means that these can remain wet for the next day's activities or results in a congested area just inside the doorways leading to a loss of heat through the entrance door.
- There are not enough classroom spaces to have one space per group. This means that two groups have to operate in the same space and this can be distracting. Groups cannot leave teaching materials set out and this results in a loss of time spent on learning.

#### **Bewerley Park**

- Poor condition of the buildings resulting in more frequent significant failures.
- Lack of flexibility of bedrooms spaces due to large dorms, resulting in a low occupancy rates.
- Bathrooms shared between two large dorms which may be primary and secondary at the same time, can mean that children feel anxious.
- The buildings are not heated evenly so heating is supplemented by electric heaters in staff areas at the ends of the buildings that can still remain cold even when the main area is too hot.
- Energy use is inefficient and not able to be controlled in relation to occupancy. This means that energy costs are high.
- Loss of heat from buildings due to lack of insulation/double glazing makes heating the buildings expensive and contributes to high carbon emissions.
- Reception is located at the far end of site, this means there is no simple way to control people entering the site and that groups can get lost on arrival. Staff have to spend time waiting for groups at the coach area around expected arrival times, and this is not a good use of staff time.
- Mini buses are located at the far end of the site which means that these and other traffic such as deliveries are moving around the site in conflict with pedestrians moving around the site. This presents additional health and safety risks.
- Stores are in small areas all around the site which makes getting ready for activities complicated and time consuming.

### **4.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

4.1 Improving the facilities at the centres will require significant capital investment. Detailed work has been undertaken to determine the capital investment at Bewerley Park to improve service delivery and reduce maintenance and running costs. Estimates for improvements to East Barnby require further work.

4.2 A two-phased approach to the capital works at Bewerley Park; the first phase will include a new accommodation block and the second phase will include a further accommodation block and a new 'hub' comprising of central facilities such as kitchen and dining area, teaching spaces, administration and storage. During Phase 1, it is intended that the centre can remain open for the full year when construction occurs with minimal loss to service delivery. During Phase 2, there is likely to be periods when the site is temporarily closed to allow for construction work in line with the council's health and safety requirements.

- 4.3 With improvements to accommodation and facilities, targeted marketing and dedicated business development resource, it is anticipated that occupancy will increase at both centres leading to an improvement in the net bottom-line.
- 4.4 Several options have been modelled over a 10-year period focusing on revenue income and expenditure only, with Phase 1 construction beginning after a full business case has been presented to Executive for approval. Phase 2 will only commence once the Outdoor Learning Service has provided sufficient financial evidence that it is making a significant revenue contribution to capital costs – it could be up to three full financial years before a recommendation is put forward to commence Phase 2 construction.
- 4.5 It is expected that there will be a small revenue deficit (provisional estimates of c. £70k) prior to the completion of construction, but this position is expected to improve following construction of the proposed new accommodation facilities. This will assist the service to set aside costs to contribute to the cost of capital outlay. The construction of Phase 2 may lead to a temporary revenue deficit during construction, due to periods of temporary closure and loss of fees from schools and groups. Following completion of phase 2, the service is expected to meet all operating costs and will be expected, through a commercial ethos to be in a position to set aside costs for capital investment.
- 4.6 In order to progress the feasibility, design and planning of construction works at Bewerley Park and East Barnby, there is a request for up to £400,000 in order to inform the full business case.

## **5.0 LEGAL IMPLICATIONS**

- 5.1 The legal implications of phase 1 and phase 2 shall be considered in the full business case.

## **6.0 RISK MANAGEMENT IMPLICATIONS**

- 6.1 Risks are regularly reviewed and managed with required mitigation and controls put in place to minimise the likelihood and impact.

## **7.0 HUMAN RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS**

- 7.1 In order to meet the business requirements going forward the staffing structure and job roles will be reviewed. Any proposed staffing changes will be subject to a full staff consultation exercise as agreed in line with the report to Executive on 16 February 2021.

## **8.0 EQUALITIES IMPLICATIONS**

- 8.1 Consideration has been given to the potential for any adverse equality impacts arising from the proposal. It is the view of officers that the proposals should not have significant adverse impact on any groups of people with protected characteristics identified in the Equalities Act 2010. However, a full EIA will be undertaken as part of the preparation of a Full Business Case.

## **9.0 ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS/BENEFITS**

- 9.1 Energy costs are high at around £70,000 per year at Bewerley Park and £40,000 per year for East Barnby.
- 9.2 The proposed project at the Bewerley Park Outdoor Education Centre provides an opportunity for investment in alternative heating infrastructure to reduce carbon emissions. Heating at the Centre is provided mainly via Oil Boilers. The carbon emissions arising from the heating system amounted to approximately 200 tonnes in 2020-21. The proposed feasibility work would include a consideration of alternative pump technology to provide

heat and ensure that any new accommodation provided has significantly improved levels of thermal performance than the current estate.

## **10.0 CONCLUSIONS / NEXT STEPS**

- 10.1 The Outdoor Learning Service provides high quality Outdoor Education in the heart of North Yorkshire. There is an opportunity for the service to develop and grow and an investment in the sites would enhance this opportunity.
- 10.2 There is potential for the service to increase its core customer base by working more closely with schools to develop an offer that meets the schools needs and encourages schools to use the centres outside of the traditional times.
- 10.3 There is potential for the service to identify commercial opportunities outside of the core business to make a contribution to the running of the service.
- 10.4 There is a need for the service to increase the staff resource around business development and marketing, in order for it to become financially self-sustaining.
- 10.5 The service will develop a strategy setting out its goals and objectives for the future and how it will move to a financially sustainable model.
- 10.6 Capital investment is required in order to improve both East Barnby and Bewerley Park and to provide facilities which will meet the needs of our customers in the future. If approved, the service will arrange for consultation with the planning department and detailed designs to be drawn up with a view to obtaining planning permission and going out to tender.
- 10.7 Details around the refurbishment at East Barnby is still in progress, however, the proposed redevelopment at Bewerley Park could be done in two phases. The first phase would include a new accommodation block and the second phase would replace the central facilities such as kitchen and dining area, teaching spaces, administration and storage and also provide more accommodation.
- 10.8 Financial modelling of a rebuild at Bewerley Park, offering more flexible and efficient accommodation, alongside a more commercial ethos by the service, has shown that it is likely that any investment required for the Phase 2 work could be recovered within 20 years.
- 10.9 Discussions will continue to take place with partners including North Yorkshire Youth and North Yorkshire Sport about how the service and other organisations can best work together to improve outcomes and experiences for young people in North Yorkshire and maximising opportunities for the sites to be used all year round.

## **11.0 RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 11.1 Executive Members are asked to note the contents of this report, and to recommend to the Chief Executive Officer that using his emergency powers he:
  - i) Approve in principle the redevelopment of Bewerley Park in two phases, with a new accommodation block in phase 1 funded by a policy investment and the central hub and further accommodation in phase 2 linked to recommendation v.
  - ii) Approve in principle improvements at East Barnby to ensure facilities are of a standard which can maintain existing customers and grow the customer base.
  - iii) Approve an investment of up to £400,000 for the Outdoor Learning Service alongside the Property Service, Procurement and the North Yorkshire consultancy 'Align Property Partners', to move to full business case to include:

- draw up detailed designs for capital work at both sites
  - investigate and apply for any required planning permission
  - undertake any surveys necessary in securing planning permission
  - go to the market for tenders for the proposed building work
- iv) Offer the Outdoor Learning Service the opportunity to prove it can operate as an efficient service with a commercial ethos by undertaking the following:
- Implement a new Outdoor Learning Strategy which includes marketing and business development
  - Recruitment to key posts in the service leadership team
  - Evidence of an increase in engagement with customers and external organisations, where permitted.
  - Evidence of investigating commercial opportunities
  - Evidence of seeking out other funding streams
- v) Invites the service to return with a full business case, to agree the implementation of phase 1.

Stuart Carlton  
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COUNTY HALL, NORTHALLERTON

13 September 2021

Author of Report – Amanda Newbold, Assistant Director – Education and Skills

**Background documents:**  
Executive Report dated 16 February 2021