

Written evidence submitted by Sara Jones (Centre Owner/Manager at RYG Outdoor Education Centre Ltd)

The Day the Government Destroyed an Industry and a British Institution

A summary:

- Viable business
- **12 months of enforced closure**
- Annual turnover £900,000 down to £21,000; **£98% loss of trade**
- **No scientific justification for closure,**
- Quality skilled jobs and year-round employment
- Providing large educational benefit
- Provision that is needed for the future

I am writing with regard to the precarious state of Residential Outdoor Education Centres in the UK. We are fortunate enough to boast some spectacular landscapes in the UK and by association some of the leading providers of outdoor education, employing highly skilled individuals. I would like the Treasury to recognise this asset and it's worth to the nation both in educational benefit and monetary value, before it is too late. Targeted funding is needed for these businesses as a matter of urgency if what is left of this industry, which has effectively been forgotten throughout this pandemic, is to be salvaged.

As an outdoor education centre although we have been “effectively open” since the end of lockdown, although due to the guidance issued by the DfE which advises all schools against overnight stays, it is for us tantamount to an enforced closure and one that will now last for over 12 months. Enforcing closure on businesses or indeed enforcing restrictions on businesses that render them unable to trade for over 12 months, with no clear reasoning or ability to plan for the future and with no compensation is nothing less than criminal.

Like many businesses we have had little option but to try and offer what we can within the guidelines. For us this meant offering a 60-bed centre to a family bubble of 4 - 8 residents. I'm sure you can see that this is not a sustainable arrangement given the overheads involved in running such a large-scale facility. Even with the majority of our staff receiving Furlough payments and being as full as we could be in the accommodation we have; we still made a small loss in August. Every month we are losing some £10-£12k. Our income this financial year is down from £900,000 to £21000. A 98% loss. I am unaware of any other industry that has been hit as hard and been so overlooked. When it is considered that we are an educational establishment operating as safely, if not more safely than schools, and that children have an entitlement to these opportunities, it really is shameful to see this industry so far down in the government's priorities with little or no thought toward the future of the sector. When lockdowns are mentioned licenced premises are up in arms about

a two-week closure, we have been effectively closed for what will now be 12 months with no targeted help.

Residential Outdoor Education centres have also been pointed towards the fact that they are able to provide day activities. This remains a very frustrating response as this does not work for many reasons. I list them below.

1. A large number of residential outdoor education centres are situated in remote and rural areas, often national parks Snowdonia, Cumbria, Yorkshire Moors etc. and journey time makes day visits unsuitable. This is a fantastic strength of many centres and one that allows children to experience the wild and awesome landscapes of our country that are often very different to their own and so often, for them, out of reach. By promoting day activities, the government is promoting and supporting those centres that operate close to urban areas at the detriment of those that are more remote. Therefore, denying children these wilder experiences in the longer term.
2. The rural population is often very low and little meaningful income can be derived
3. Centres are often clustered together in these rural areas e.g. Snowdonia, Cumbria, Peak District, Yorkshire Moors, Brecon Beacons, Dartmoor etc. Therefore, the suggestion of day activities leaves centres competing with their neighbours for what are small scraps when the resident population is divided.
4. For a residential outdoor centre carrying ongoing fixed costs of large premises the income generated from day activities is not sufficient to cover costs, even in the peak months of July and August.

I hope that it can be seen that the situation for providers is a little more complex.

RYG is a viable business, there is a large demand for our services from schools mainly in the Berkshire area. We have expanded our operations 4 times over the last eight years in order to service the increased demand and projecting ahead the future looked very good. We offer a quality service which offers smaller margins than bigger commercial operators and the benefit to the children who visit us and the need to continue to benefit from this high-quality provision, remains our focus.

We have 12 permanent staff and employ a further 4 instructors on a freelance basis. The business generates £900k of income per annum around £202'000 of which is paid in annual tax. If we are still closed at the end of March, instead of a surplus of £150k, we will be overdrawn to that extent even with CBIL. A debt that will be carried for some time due to the uncertain nature of the years ahead and the narrow margins occurred in providing quality provision. As a business we will owe Corporation tax relating to our previous financial year, which was very good but this figure will not match our current income. We will also have VAT to pay which has been deferred, along with further refunds of deposits the longer we remain closed. As many deposits have been carried over these will of course be taken off any future income. We also face start-up costs to bring our operations back on line after what will have been a break of over 12 months, bringing our fleet of minibuses back into operation will cost around £10,000 alone after all the appropriate checks and taxes. We also face additional costs to become "Covid secure". As a business we hold a Traffic Operators licence with the Traffic commissioner to operate our fleet of 5

minibuses. We are expected to show an operating surplus of 25K to maintain the fleet.

We are a year-round business, we shut for only 2 weeks in the winter, so our staff are in year-round employment. I would estimate that in order to be able to take a group of children through a week's residential education course, between 5 and 6 years of training is required as a minimum. I am sure, you would also acknowledge the huge amount of time it takes for one of our teachers/instructors to be trained. Our six-teaching staff have 109 years of experience between them. Therefore, we are different from "hospitality" where a lot of employment is often seasonal and low skilled. It has been essential to us to keep our staff team, without whom we would not be able to reopen. Putting together a new staff team with appropriate skill sets would take time and new staff are always inducted on a rolling process being able to shadow other more experienced professionals. We have incurred the cost of keeping them on but the continual restrictions that we are incurring with no agreed guidance for the future and therefore no ability to plan is putting us and the whole industry in jeopardy.

There still remains no scientific explanation for our closure. We feel we could open safely and many of our visiting schools recognise that our operation of hosting one school bubble, having sole use of a larger facility, the ability to be outside all day and reducing children's normal social contacts is safer than what is being provided for our children in school. Headteachers and parents are angry that children are missing out on these valuable experiences and moreover that the provision is being put at risk for the future.

We are just one of many hundreds of residential outdoor education centres across the UK facing these difficulties. This educational industry often providing quality jobs in rural areas of the UK. Viable businesses contributing to 15000 jobs and an income of 700 million. All of whom are now in peril due to continual government restrictions.

Targeted financial support is needed for these centres and there is a matter of urgency if what is left of these businesses, this income for the UK, these skilled jobs and the wider supply chain is to be salvaged.

Summary of needs:

- Need to retain highly skilled staff
- Need to cover ongoing fixed costs
- Support over the coming financial year

Suggestions:

- A lump sum to cover some way towards losses already incurred due to government restrictions, until residential centres are able to resume.
- A voucher system for schools to utilise over the next academic year towards residential outdoor education and supporting those families most in need.
- Ongoing furlough increased to 150% to support the businesses as well as the employees until restrictions are lifted.

December 2020