

Why losing High Borrans Outdoor Education Centre matters

The potential closure of [High Borrans](#) announced on 30th June comes against a wider backdrop of closures across the private, charitable and local authority sectors.

This is not an isolated story. It is part of a long, quiet trend that reflects a gradual shrinking of the opportunities available for young people to experience residential outdoor education, reflected in the number of centres that have closed in recent years.

This matters, not just because of nostalgia or local pride, but because residential outdoor education continues to deliver outcomes that our education system increasingly struggles to secure elsewhere. If we are serious about access, equity and public value, local authority provision still plays a critical role.

The evidence is clear: residential work

Even a cautious reading of the research shows a consistent picture. Short residential outdoor experiences, typically just a few days, produce strong and immediate gains in personal and social development, including improved confidence and resilience, better communication and teamwork, stronger relationships with peers and teachers and increased independence and motivation. Teachers report deeper understanding of their pupils, which feeds back into classroom engagement.

Recent evaluation of the [Adventures Away from Home](#) (AAfH) programme reinforces this, showing improvements in socio-emotional skills, relationships and confidence, particularly for those facing barriers to participation. These are exactly the outcomes that education, health and youth services are increasingly trying to support.

Outdoor residential deliver outcomes across education, health and wellbeing, community cohesion and environmental awareness. These benefits are long-term and shared across systems, not easily captured in short-term decisions.

The real issue is not demand: it's access

As outdoor learning provision becomes more complex and resource-intensive, as residential are, inequality increases, yet AAfH shows that when barriers are reduced (e.g. cost), participation increases significantly. Closing a centre like High Borrans, where local children are subsidised to attend, does not simply reduce supply: it redistributes opportunity away from those least able to replace it.

The quiet decline of local authority provision

Local authorities once played a central role in building outdoor education infrastructure. Hundreds of centres were established in the post-war decades but since then provision has steadily declined as centres have closed, been sold, or transferred, capacity shifting towards private and charitable providers. This is not just a change in ownership, rather it is a change in how access is structured and prioritised.

Local authority centres still have a central role to play. This is not a nostalgic argument, though - it is a functional one. Traditionally, local authority provision was more likely to prioritise subsidised access, inclusion and SEND and focus on local children and schools. In a system where affordability is the biggest barrier, this matters. Over time, the capacity of local authorities to subsidise places has reduced, yet their continued existence is testament to the

core belief in equitable access that influenced their original establishment. Today LA, private and charity provision each make up roughly a third of the residential outdoor education centres across England and Wales. If the aim is to ensure that the sector is able to meet the goal of offering all children and young people opportunities for residential outdoor learning, then this mixed model is essential. It not only provides choice in terms of activities and approaches, but also ensures that the capacity exists to achieve this equitably.

Cost matters – and it should

It would be naïve to ignore the financial pressures on local authorities. Budgets are constrained, statutory services dominate, and outdoor education centres occupy a difficult position. The financial reality is real and cannot be discounted. However, framing the question as simply one of “can we afford this?” misses something essential. Asking instead, “what does this deliver, and what replaces it if it goes?” forces a discussion about the true nature and value of the experience. Residential is perhaps best understood as early investment in young people’s development, not optional enrichment, because when residential provision is removed, the costs may well be displaced over time, into mental health systems, into behaviour and attendance support and into wider intervention.

What about the cost of travel?

One of the most common challenges raised is the cost of travelling to centres that are often located at some distance from schools. This is a real issue, but it is also often misunderstood.

Residential is often regarded as sitting at the top of the outdoor learning progression, precisely because they create sustained time away from home, deeper relationships and real opportunities for independence. They are not simply about “being outside”, as the outcomes depend on access to **different environments, being away** from everyday routines and expectations and exposure to **novel challenge and unfamiliar settings**. These elements are not accidental - they are fundamental to the impact. Evidence shows that novelty, challenge and being in a new environment are key drivers of outcomes such as confidence, resilience and independence. In that sense, travel is not just a logistical cost but a part of the educational experience itself.

There is also an equity dimension. Without travel, young people in urban or disadvantaged areas may never access high-quality natural environments. Travel enables **equal access to experiences that are not locally available**. This does not mean costs can be ignored. It does mean they need to be managed and justified through value. The key question is not whether travel is expensive, it is whether the outcomes it enables can be achieved in any other way.

Ultimately, schools make decisions about how best to achieve the outcomes they are aiming for. For some, that may be through on-site provision or local activity. For others, a residential offers something that cannot be replicated in the same way. The important point is that the choice exists. As centres close, that choice narrows and with it, the breadth of what the education system can realistically offer.

Alternative business models exist

Other models do exist, through charitable trusts, the private sector and mixed commercial and educational models. These are important, as they provide ways and means for the provision to continue. However, access depends on **how provision is funded and structured**, not just whether it exists. Where provision relies more heavily on parental contribution, access

becomes less equitable and the chances of opportunities being shortened, reduced or cut completely increases. This issue becomes more significant in light of current policy.

Supporting enrichment

England's emerging **enrichment framework** places “nature, outdoor and adventure” at the heart of a broad educational offer. Schools will increasingly be expected to demonstrate outcomes related to personal development, wellbeing and engagement beyond the classroom. Outdoor learning residentials are central to that ambition as they are where independence is tested, relationships deepen, sustained challenge takes place and the most transformative outcomes are seen. They are not just part of enrichment, they are perhaps one of the **deepest expressions of it**.

This creates a clear tension. Policy is asking for more enrichment, yet system capacity is shrinking. If centres continue to close, access will depend more on parental means leading to fewer options for schools and inequality will increase. The risk is a national expectation without the infrastructure to deliver it.

At the very least: consult, then consider alternatives

Recognising financial pressures, decisions of this scale are significant and have long term ramifications: closing a centre removes long-standing public capacity. At a minimum, councils should:

- **consult meaningfully** with schools and communities
- **set out clearly the costs and benefits**
- **explore alternative models**

Options exist through transfer to charitable trusts, shared provision, partnerships with schools and hybrid funding models. All models face pressures, but exploring them matters. Once a centre is lost, it is extremely difficult to rebuild.

The real balancing act

This is not a choice between idealism and reality. It is a balance between short-term financial pressure and long-term system value. Local authorities sit at the centre of that balance.

High Borran is a warning

The potential closure of High Borran is not an isolated event. It is a signal that capacity is being lost, access is becoming more unequal and system capability is eroding at the very moment when policy expects more.

Conclusion: making value visible

We are moving toward a system that values enrichment and wellbeing more than ever, yet we are simultaneously losing the infrastructure needed to deliver it. We are not just losing provision but narrowing the choices available to schools and young people.

The task is not to deny the cost but to ensure that the **value, and the capacity required to deliver it, are fully recognised**.

Further reading:

[Adventures Away from Home 2024/25 Evaluation Report](#)

[Different Journeys: Regional variations in English school residential visits and changes over time.](#)



<https://www.daveharveyoutdoorlearning.co.uk/post/why-losing-high-borrans-outdoor-education-centre-matters>