

FULL REPORT

IOL North West Conference 2026

6 February 2026 | Brathay Hall, Ambleside

“Such a valuable day”

The Institute for Outdoor Learning North West Conference 2026 was held on Friday 6 February at Brathay Trust, Ambleside. Despite a wild and wet start to the day, with persistent rain throughout, the atmosphere inside Brathay Hall was warm, energetic and full of conversation as over 90 outdoor learning professionals gathered from across the region.

Venue and Setting

Brathay Trust provided a fitting and inspiring venue, nestled in the Lake District landscape. While the weather reflected the realities of outdoor practice in the North West, it also reinforced the shared resilience and adaptability of the sector. The Brathay venue team were instrumental in creating a welcoming, well-organised space that supported learning, networking and reflection.

Delegates and Opening

Delegates included practitioners, educators, students and leaders from a wide range of settings, including Kendal College and other outdoor learning providers. The day opened with introductions and scene-setting, establishing a strong sense of shared purpose and highlighting the value of connection, collaboration and reflective practice across the sector.

Workshops

The programme offered a rich mix of practical, theoretical and academic workshops, allowing delegates to shape their own journey through the day.

Workshop Session 1 explored leadership, inclusion and professional responsibility, with sessions on:

- Nordic Walking – Nicky Merrett
- Accessibility in outdoor learning – Chris and Vicky Binks
- Understanding schools - Carol Murdoch
- Leader responsibilities – Guy Jarvis
- Leadership and facilitation - Dr Jason King
- Rights, risks and relationships – Neal Anderson

Workshop Session 2 focused on wellbeing, pedagogy and team development:

- Nature and the nervous system – Lily Horseman
- Improv as pedagogy - Brie Wintz
- Building better teams – Sam Lee
- Wilderness therapeutic approaches and interventions – Michele Wilcock
- Indoor–outdoor learning – Dawn Thomas

- Teacher–student relationships – Rebecca Hordern

Workshop Session 3 returned to hands-on practice and reflective approaches:

- Making a mallet – Sarah Coates and Katy Dowdall
- Developing collaboration through friction fire – David Pegg
- Improv as pedagogy – Brie Wintz
- Being in time – Myles Farnbank
- Systemic coaching and constellations – Richard Tarran
- The Outdoor Learning Toolkit – Carol Murdoch

Sector Updates

A comprehensive series of sector updates ensured delegates were well informed about current developments and opportunities, with contributions from:

IOL, Ernest Cook Trust, AIAAC, The Outdoor Partnership, MTUK, Paddle UK, Association for Outdoor Therapy, Active Cumbria, Lyon Equipment, Forest Schools Association.

Keynote and Lunch

A hot lunch was followed by an inspiring talk from **Rich Ensoll**, who shared reflections on his 46-day canoe journey around Ireland. His account provided both motivation and perspective, resonating strongly with delegates and sparking further conversation throughout the afternoon.

Reflections and Impact

Feedback from delegates highlighted the value of networking, shared learning and renewed enthusiasm for practice. Many attendees spoke of leaving the conference with fresh ideas, strengthened connections and a deeper sense of belonging within the IOL community.

The day reinforced the importance of working together across organisations and regions to improve outdoor learning experiences for young people. As one delegate noted, *“Don’t make outdoor learning an island.”*

Closing and Thanks

The conference closed with thanks to all presenters, the Brathay Trust venue team, and the IOL North West committee for organising such a valuable and well-received event. The strong turnout, lively discussions and positive feedback demonstrated the continued appetite for professional learning, collaboration and innovation within the outdoor learning sector.

