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improving Scottish education

Review
Of
Voluntary Sector Organisations
(Community Learning and Development)

Scottish Centres

November 2003

INTRODUCTION

The review

The review took place from 19th to 22nd September 2003. The review team consisted of an MM Inspector from HMle's Community Learning and Development Team and an Associate Assessor. The review was designed to answer key questions:

- to what extent is the organisation fulfilling its obligations to the grants scheme?
- how effective are the services and programmes offered within the context of the grants scheme?
- to what extent is the organisation operating in a professionally competent manner?

The review activities were undertaken within the headquarters of Scottish Centres at Loaningdale Centre, Biggar and through visits to Dounans Centre, Aberfoyle and Belmont Centre, Meigle. The review team conducted interviews with the chairman and members of the management committee and the chief executive and members of Scottish Centres' staff. A small random sample of service users was invited to respond to a written questionnaire about Scottish Centres' services. Ten responses, completed by users from the primary and secondary schools sectors, were analysed.

The co-operation of directors, managers, and staff is gratefully acknowledged.

The organisation

Scottish Centres was established as a company limited by guarantee, the Scottish Environmental and Outdoor Education Centres Association Ltd, in 1987. It had formerly been a Non-Departmental Public Body, the Scottish National Camps Association Limited, which was established following The Camps Act of 1939. Scottish Centres is governed by a Council comprising of representatives nominated by professional and public bodies in Scotland. These include CoSLA, the Associations for Directors of Education and Leisure and Recreation and the Educational Institute of Scotland. The Council appoints a management committee that oversees operational management. The actions of the Council is controlled by the company's Memorandum and Articles of Association, 1993, which require the company to comply with the terms of The Companies Acts, 1985 and 1989. Scottish Centres is a Registered Scottish Charity.

The primary aim of Scottish Centres is:

To manage residential outdoor education centres/or the social, physical and intellectual benefit of the community at large and of children and young people in particular.

In its business plan for 2003 to 2005 it sets out its vision as follows:

To establish Scottish Centres as the leader in provision of outdoor and environmental education for sustainable development in Scotland and the UK,

and its mission is to:

- provide the highest standards in environmental education for sustainable development;
- provide a context for exciting and safe activities, and through structured reflection and review, enable young people to transfer the lessons to their everyday life;
- provide specific and innovative programmes for young people at risk or having been excluded and provide support for families under stress;
- provide programmes for vulnerable children and undertake preventative work;
- support teachers in the delivery of the curriculum;
- develop all centres as exemplars of sustainable development; and
- work in partnership with others to achieve these objectives.

Scottish Centres' turnover net of VAT in the financial year to 31st December 2002 was £1,320,574. Of this amount, £60,770 was received in grant income from the Scottish Executive Education Department to support headquarters administration costs. The company's net debt at the end of this period was £559,554 set against assets with a net book value of £1,897,683.

Scottish Centres manages around 50 of the available residential outdoor education capacity in Scotland. However, their centres have suffered from under-investment in facilities improvement over many years. Scottish Centres recognises the need for improvement and has initiated a pragmatic and innovative programme to upgrade existing facilities.

THE ORGANISATION'S OBLIGATIONS TO THE TERMS OF THE GRANT SCHEME

The extent to which outcomes match grant criteria

The extent to which programme and project outcomes matched grant criteria was very good. Scottish Centres was operating fully in accordance with the grant criteria set out in the Further Education (Approved Associations) (Scotland) Grant Regulations 1989. The Business Plan for 2003 to 2005 was very well presented and clearly written. It explicitly linked Scottish Centres' work with key Scottish Executive policy priorities for education, health, social inclusion and sustainable development. It argued cogently for the benefits that outdoor residential experience brings to these policy fields. A majority of fieldwork staff demonstrated a clear understanding of the learning that underpins their activities with children and young people. Management committee members were expert in their various fields and brought energy and commitment to realising the full potential of the organisation. Service users valued highly the programmes and facilities offered at the centres.

The extent to which programmes were operational and on schedule

The extent to which programmes were operational and on schedule was good. Headquarters staff had developed effective and consistent approaches to supporting the work of centres. Staff in centres ensured that the needs of users were met despite the constraints presented by outdated facilities. Centre users viewed

staff as approachable, helpful and friendly. However, Scottish Centres had been unable to fill a key post of

Director, Education. This post had a key responsibility to further develop the focus on learning in the work of centres and improve links with schools.

Programme management and delivery

The extent to which programmes were effectively managed and delivered was very good. Staff at Dounans Centre delivered the highly regarded Residential Outdoor Environmental Experience programme (ROEE). ROEE was structured around the 5-14 curriculum guidelines with a strong emphasis on personal and social development, environmental education and citizenship. Teachers commented on its success in building pupils' confidence, in building their capacity to work with others and the benefits they derived from working with skilled instructors. Teachers were systematically consulted about the services provided. Staff at Belmont Centre delivered effectively the Inclusion Partnership Initiative (IPI), an innovative programme for vulnerable children and young people who were experiencing difficulties in their lives. Programmes were individually negotiated with participants to meet their needs. Programme management was effective. Staff were all clear about their specific roles and responsibilities.

Overall, Scottish Centres was fulfilling its obligations under the grant regulations in a competent and effective manner.

THE EFFECTIVENESS OF SERVICES AND PROGRAMMES

Element: BI range and relevance of services

BI.1. audits of need

Audits of need were good overall. Staff within the IP! prepared programmes on an individual basis to meet the specific needs of the young people involved. They had undertaken an effective programme to identify the needs of young people within the Muirton area of Perth. This programme encouraged the active participation of young people and contributed to the development of more targeted services for disaffected young people. Staff involved in delivering the ROEE programme worked with partners in education services to identify the needs of upper primary pupils. They made good use of existing networks with the formal education sector. However, Scottish Centres needed to promote its work more vigorously in authorities outwith the network of existing users.

BI.2 content and methods

Content and methods were good overall. Scottish Centres' staff were involved in a wide range of good quality outdoor learning activities. Most staff used well-designed materials that had a clear focus on promoting the personal and social development of young people. Programmes within the IP1 had a flexible

structure and staff supported young people to negotiate and direct their activities. The ROEE programme was linked appropriately to the requirements of the 5-14 curriculum. Staff in this programme had a good understanding of the learning outcomes associated with the activities they offered. However, children and young people participating within Scottish Centres programmes had insufficient access to good quality information relating to positive values and health. Staff should make greater use of promotional materials from national agencies to promote positive values and health messages.

B1.3 Monitoring and evaluation

Monitoring and Evaluation was very good. Scottish Centre staff involved in the delivery of outdoor learning activities completed activity-recording sheets. Staff within the IPI had developed appropriate assessment tools for use in their work. These tools focussed well on identifying progress in young people's personal and

social development. Staff within the ROEE had undertaken regular self-assessment and user evaluation processes. These processes provided a very useful basis for staff to plan improvements in the future delivery

of the programme. Scottish Centres proposed to work in partnership with a university to undertake a longitudinal study of young people who had participated in programmes delivered by Scottish Centres. This

offered considerable potential to establish robust evidence of the impact of the residential experience on children and young peoples' personal and social development. More immediately, Scottish Centres should introduce follow-up teacher evaluations to test the short term impact of the residential experience on classroom learning and teaching.

Overall, the effectiveness of services and programmes was good and in some important respects, very good.

PROFESSIONAL COMPETENCE

Management planning

Management planning was very good. The relatively new chief executive had adopted an inclusive approach in developing the Business Plan for 2003 to 2005. Consequently, staff and committee members shared a high degree of ownership of the plan. The plan set out very coherently the company's vision, mission and business priorities. These priorities addressed very well the key business and quality improvement requirements for the period ahead. The targets set were challenging but potentially achievable. They included pragmatic yet imaginative plans for the much-needed upgrading of the sites and facilities available at the centres. The plan set out exceptionally well the link between Scottish Centres' work and key priorities of the Scottish Executive in relation to education, health, social inclusion and sustainable development.

Policy development

Policy development was good overall with some very good aspects. Scottish Centres fully complied with the requirements of the Adventure Activity Licensing Authority (AALA). For activities not covered by these registration requirements they had introduced practical and thorough Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs). Specific SOPs provided a very helpful focus on the learning outcomes associated with activities. In relation to the IPI, Scottish Centres were registered as a residential child care facility with the Scottish Care Commission. These facilities were the subject of annual inspections to ensure that quality standards were maintained. Due attention was paid in staff training to the implementation of policies in relation to food hygiene, health and safety and child protection. Scottish Centres needed to review its equal opportunities policy to ensure compliance with legislation and guidance on race and disabilities discrimination.

Financial control

Financial control was very good. Staff and management committee members clearly understood their financial and legal responsibilities and obligations. Financial accountability was clear and annual accounts were very well presented and appropriately audited. Financial planning had been very centralised but staff were now in the process of devolving budget management to centres. Centre managers and the finance officer now made significant contributions to budget management decisions. Finance staff were also improving information management to provide more useful information for planning and

Involvement of users was very good in the context of Scottish Centres' arrangements for governance. Teachers who used the centres confirmed that staff were very open and responsive to suggestions for improvement. Feedback from users was positively encouraged and acted upon. Committee members were fully engaged in taking forward improvements in the organisation's work. Management committee members worked more closely with staff than they had in the past.

Leadership and ethos

Leadership and ethos were very good. The chief executive and management committee were providing strong, effective, insightful and determined leadership in taking Scottish Centres forward. Their clear and shared vision provided a purposeful context for the work of all staff. Relationships between staff and management committee members were characterised by trust and purposefulness. All levels of staff were valued for their contribution. The leadership and ethos of the organisation was characterised by a strong commitment to customer service and quality improvement.

Staff development

Staff development was good overall. The Business Plan committed Scottish Centres to providing staff with the best in-house and external training and to achieving Investors in People status by 2005. However, staff development in important aspects of delivery was uneven across the centres. ROEE instructors at Belmont Centre had a very good understanding of the learning purposes underpinning their work. Instructors at Loaningdale Centre were less confident in articulating these aspects of their work. Annual appraisals had been introduced for some but not all staff. Induction training for new staff was effective. All staff demonstrated a strong commitment to thinking differently in order to improve services and company performance. Managers were committed to flexible approaches to staff development including the introduction of in-house accredited programmes.

Scottish Centres had made significant progress in developing its professional competence in the recent past. It was, overall, a highly competent organisation that had embarked on a very promising and far-reaching programme of change management.

KEY STRENGTHS

Scottish Centres demonstrated the following key strengths:

- the effectiveness of the Residential Outdoor Environmental Experience programme at Dounans Centre in supporting teachers to deliver the 5-14 curriculum;
- the innovative nature of the Inclusion Partnership Initiative in providing personal development opportunities for children and young people experiencing difficulties in their lives.
- the overall professionalism of the chief executive, management committee members and staff in managing an effective organisation whilst working towards ambitious plans for improvement;
- the high quality of leadership provided by the chief executive and members of the management committee;
- the exceptionally well developed and ambitious Business Plan for 2003 to 2005;

MAIN POINTS FOR ACTION

Scottish Centres should consider:

- pursuing vigorously its pragmatic plans to upgrade the facilities at its centres so that they are fit for purpose in the 21st Century;
- making further progress in delivering and demonstrating the learning outcomes for children and young people of their residential outdoor experience. An early appointment to the post of Director, Education would help to secure this;
- improving learning and teaching areas by displaying the work of learners and make use of display to reinforce key messages on values and health;
- developing stronger links with local authority and voluntary sector partners across Scotland to promote its work better; and
- working with partners to secure the financial future of the innovative and important Inclusion Partnership Initiative.

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Definitions of terms used in this report

When conducting reviews of voluntary organisations, HM Inspectors use a quality framework when making judgements about the work of an organisation. These quality indicators relate judgements to four levels of performance. This report uses the following word scale to make clear the judgements made by Inspectors:

very good	major strengths
good	more strengths than weaknesses
fair	some important weaknesses
unsatisfactory	major weaknesses