

Update for Schools

Thursday 4th March 2021

Background

The last year has been a testing time, no less for schools and young people. Plas Pencelli has been closed to visitors since the end of March 2020. During the ebb and flow of the pandemic, restart dates have come and gone. We can only reopen when the Department for Education (DfE) advice to schools allows *Residential Educational Visits*. Lobbying of government by the outdoor sector has continued throughout the last year and a representative body, the Schools Travel Sector Stakeholder Group (STSSG), is meeting regularly with the DfE to:

- *Encourage a change in advice to schools to allow reopening*
- *Agree COVID-19 protocols for outdoor centres*
- *Seek further financial support for outdoor centres*

The recent lockdown and roll out of the vaccine programme have eased the impact of the pandemic and the UK government has now set out a roadmap for recovery. Under this plan the earliest that schools could attend Plas Pencelli would be May 17th. However, that would only be if conditions that applied to schools were also applied to outdoor centres. In the past, outdoor centres have been classified as *Hospitality*, in which case its more likely that Plas Pencelli would reopen on June 21st. However, this is not certain as when *Hospitality* restarted last summer, DfE advice continued to prohibit schools attending residential. DfE advice to schools was reviewed at the end of February and although previously had indicated an April opening now states “*We advise against all educational visits at this time. This advice will be kept under review*”.

“We have a School Booking at Plas Pencelli. What should we do?”

1. A Booking between April 18th and May 16th

It is now extremely unlikely that government advice will allow schools to attend during this period. We will wait until 12th March before confirming the centre will close if we need to. However, given the uncertainty, you may now want to now cancel this booking. Your deposit and any other fees collected will be returned.

2. A Booking between May 17th and June 20th

There is some doubt whether government advice will allow schools to attend during this period. However, it is still possible that Plas Pencelli will be classified as an educational establishment and that lobbying will bring a change in DfE guidance and that we are able to open on May 17th and operate under agreed COVID-19 protocols. It is hoped that you will retain your booking for now to await further news. We intend to confirm, one way or another, on March 31st, 2 days before the Easter break.

3. A Booking between June 21st and July 31st

This corresponds with the 4th stage of the UK roadmap when “*No legal limits on social contacts*” should be introduced. We fully expect to be open during this period. However, government advice allowing schools to attend residential has sometimes lagged behind the end of lockdowns in the past, so there is a small amount of uncertainty. You are advised to maintain your booking as it is likely to go ahead.

4. A Booking from September 1st onwards

Its assumed Plas Pencelli will be fully back too normal by the new academic year

with a high degree of certainty. You are advised to maintain your booking.

5. You have no Booking at Present.

Bookings are taken up to 2 years ahead, presently up to March 2023. There is much competition. Deposits are only collected 12 months before a course so you can secure a booking in 2022/23 with a completed booking form. To avoid disappointment make a booking now up to 2 years ahead.

The Re-opening of Plas Pencelli

The whole outdoor sector has been under threat during the last year and some outdoor centres have closed for good. At Plas Pencelli we have reduced costs severely, furloughed many staff and accessed government grant aid where possible. It means, with the support of Swindon Borough Council, Plas Pencelli remains viable, but really does need to re-open soon. The buildings and site have been well maintained and there has been developments in many areas. Returning visitors will discover a facility in good shape and with noticeable improvements. For all schools visiting Plas Pencelli we will ensure that all activities and standards will be in line with government guidance on coronavirus. We will also apply the Outdoor Sector's comprehensive protocols on coronavirus and liaise with all visiting schools to ensure account is taken of local school coronavirus protocols, that young people are familiar with. At Plas Pencelli, there is a great deal of space for all to safely socially distance and much of the day will be spent in the outdoors where transmission is much more unlikely.

Cancelations between April and July 2021

Throughout this difficult year we have not charged any school for cancelling a booking for *bona fide* pandemic reasons, despite any booking conditions to the contrary. Plas Pencelli and Swindon Borough Council have accepted all the costs associated with cancelled courses due to pandemic reasons and this policy is set to continue for now. If you decide to cancel your course for pandemic reasons in this period, a full refund will be made. You should be aware that not all outdoor providers have adopted this policy, often relying on schools to claim on their insurance policies instead.

Young People and the Future

There can be no better time for young people to attend a residential week at Plas Pencelli than this summer. We think it will be the right experience to kick start each young person's school career whatever age, adults included. We know that outdoor education is very successful in the positive development of young people and contributing to general wellbeing. We are as enthusiastic as ever and ready to welcome young people back to Plas Pencelli. Meanwhile you may want to lend your support to the [Save Outdoor Education](#) campaign sharing social media postings, talking to friends, family and colleagues, so that the message is spread far and wide.

Thanks for your support.

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