

Introduction

The **Association of Heads of Outdoor Education Centres (AHOEC)** is a membership organisation for individuals in strategic leadership roles within the outdoor learning sector.

The **AHOEC Gold Standard** is a prestigious accreditation awarded to providers that can demonstrate excellence in operational practices and high-quality learning outcomes. This accreditation is only available to providers where the controlling body, such as a school or centre, employs full AHOEC members in senior leadership positions. Applications for the Gold Badge must be made by individual centres/schools, not by overarching services. The Gold Standard serves as a statement of principles and expectations for the responsible and high-quality provision of organised outdoor learning, and training. While primarily designed for providers offering courses and activities to young people under the age of 18, its principles can also be adapted for adult learning and training experiences.

Undertaking the Gold Standard is also recognised as a valuable professional development process. It offers an opportunity to benchmark your organisation's practices against national good practice, and to receive expert external insight and support. While the process may seem daunting at first, AHOEC can connect applicants with experienced mentors to guide them through the initial application and beyond.

As a structured framework, the Gold Standard can help providers develop strategic and operational procedures that align with their organisation's principles and expectations. Additionally, achieving Gold Standard accreditation automatically qualifies the provider for the **Learning Outside the Classroom (LOtC) Quality Badge** and **Adventure Mark** accreditations. These additional recognitions can be obtained upon payment of a supplementary fee, without the need for further inspection.

The Gold Standard

Gold Standard is managed by a sub-committee, within AHOEC, appointed by and accountable to the Executive. This Gold Standard Managing Group oversees the smooth running of the scheme and is responsible for the inspection contract. Inspire2Adventure currently holds the inspection contract.

The inspection process begins with the provider completing a Self-Evaluation Form (SEF), which outlines the criteria detailed below. Providers are expected to use the SEF to indicate how their provision meets each criterion. The completed SEF must be submitted prior to inspection, after which a date will be arranged for an onsite visit. The onsite inspection is guided by the provider's SEF and covers the full scope of provision. Inspectors will request supporting evidence and observe a practical outdoor learning session. (Further details of the inspection process can be found below)

A summary of the eight areas assessed:

1. Learning and Development

- Intended outcomes of the visit are negotiated and reviewed
- Clear understanding of quality learning and development
- Consistency of approach in programme organisation, delivery, and content
- Opportunities for learning are embedded
- Commitment to Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion

2. Safety Management

- Arrangements are in place for the health, safety, and welfare of all staff and participants
- A culture of safety
- Risk management strategies and operating procedures are implemented, regularly monitored, and reviewed
- Arrangements for the remote supervision of unaccompanied groups
- Accident, incident, emergency protocols and critical incidents are in place
- Staff competency is assessed and recorded
- Access to technical advice
- Equipment is fit for purpose and equipment maintenance and inspection systems are in place

3. Safeguarding children, young people and vulnerable adults

- Safeguarding children, young people, and vulnerable adults
- Security arrangements are in place to manage risks posed by unauthorised visitors
- Operational and Safeguarding procedures ensure privacy.
- Practices are in place to safeguard staff
- Psychological and physical impact considerations are taken into account

4. Customer care

- Customer care is robust and systematic
- Amenities, facilities and the nature of the activity programmes are described fairly
- A clear and transparent charging policy is in place
- Responsibility for supervision, welfare, and out-of-hours support is clearly defined.
- Organisers are informed that in the interests of safety, it may be necessary to cancel or modify advertised activities
- A system for obtaining and evaluating feedback is in place and there is a process for implementing change and a complaints procedure is in place
- Administration is based on clear and recorded procedures
- Data security policy

5. Leadership and Management

- Management and responsibility structure is in place and effective leadership and management is evident
- Leadership and management demonstrate a clear understanding of high-quality learning and have a strategic, well-defined pathway to achieve it.
- Arrangements for monitoring, evaluating and developing employees
- Leadership strives for organisational security and future viability
- Effective internal and external communication

6. Facilities and Transport

- Vehicles used for transporting participants are roadworthy and meet legal and employer guidance requirements
- Drivers meet current legal and employer guidance requirements
- All external providers comply with legal and statutory responsibilities
- Facility related maintenance and inspection systems are in place
- Accommodation and facilities are fit for purpose
- Risks associated with providing refreshments and catering are managed

7. Environmental Sustainability

- Biodiversity is actively promoted
- Water usage and protection are managed
- Healthy living is promoted through outdoor activity and wellbeing practices
- Energy consumption is monitored and reduced
- Waste is minimised through the principles of the 3Rs
- Food practices support sustainability.
- Transport choices support environmental sustainability

8. Continuous Improvement

Evidence of improvement in:

- Learning and Development
- Safety Management
- Safeguarding
- Customer care
- Leadership and Management
- Facilities and Transport
- Environmental Sustainability

The Process

Upon application and payment, providers will be sent the SEF document, the AHOEC Gold guidance document and possible mentor suggestions. Applicants should consider identifying a suitable mentor to support the process. The mentor does not need to be (but most often is) someone who has been through the Gold Standard process and someone they respect and whose judgement they value. It is important to remember that you may be sharing commercially sensitive information.

1. Initial Completion of the Self-Evaluation Form (SEF)

The SEF is completed electronically as a word document. Applicants must complete all sections, documenting evidence and indicating where it can be found. This is intended to be a development opportunity, and applicants should be thorough and provide as much evidence as possible, involving as many staff members as possible. Applicants are then encouraged to grade themselves, for each criterion. Grading is from 1 to 5 and is explained further in the Outcome section.

If the applicant is working towards meeting the criteria, this should be recorded as such; similarly, if the evidence is unavailable, they should indicate this. Relevant documentation

may be attached. If not submitted electronically, applicants should indicate where evidence can be found, and they will be expected to produce the evidence for the inspector.

Members should note that Section 8 asks for evidence of continual improvement since the last inspection. In the case of the first inspection, this should be ignored.

The SEF is submitted to gold@ahoec.org and forwarded to one of the AHOEC Gold Inspectors who will assess the SEF and arrange a mutually convenient inspection date.

Along with the submission of a completed SEF you will also be asked to provide evidence of appropriate levels of public liability, product, and third-party insurance. Please note this must be a minimum of £5m.

2. The Inspection Process

Inspections are conducted biannually by appointed inspectors who bring extensive experience in the outdoor learning sector. Each inspector is a seasoned practitioner, holding high-level governing body awards, and undergoes comprehensive training in inspection procedures as well as the criteria for the Learning Outside the Classroom (LOtC) Quality Badge and Adventure Mark.

Before the Inspection: Prior to the visit, the assigned inspector will review the SEF to gain a thorough understanding of the centre. This preparation ensures a well-informed and effective assessment on the day.

During the Inspection: On the day of the inspection, the inspector will need access to a staff member who can support the SEF process, this is a crucial part of the process. The inspector will:

- Review the Provider Declaration.
- Sample the evidence provided to support the SEF criteria.
- Observe at least one activity — typically one that falls outside the scope of AALA licensing regulations if the provider is AALA licensed.
- Meet with the providers staff and customers, where possible, to support the evidence provided in the SEF.
- Sample other aspects of the centre's operations as deemed appropriate.
- Discuss their observations and recommendations with the provider.

The duration of the inspection will depend on the size of the provision and the nature of the evidence submitted. As a general guide, inspections on average will take 6 hours on site.

Inspector Credentials and Support

All inspectors are currently accredited for LOtC and Adventure Mark and are trained in the specifics of the AHOEC Gold Standard. Occasionally, an inspector may be accompanied by a trainee or a colleague conducting a quality assurance visit. In rare cases where an inspector encounters an activity outside their expertise, they will consult the contractor, who will seek guidance from a suitable expert or body.

Outcome

During the inspection the Inspector will make a judgement, based on the SEF and the onsite evidence and will award a score to each criterion. If each criteria scores a 4 or higher, then the inspector will recommend that the AHOEC Gold badge is awarded.

If a criterion falls below a score of 4 the inspector may request that further evidence is needed, prior to the awarding of the Gold Standard. The collection of additional information will be managed by Inspire2Adventure who will liaise with the provider, setting realistic timescales and a list of documents/evidence required.

Evaluation Criteria	Score
<i>Outstanding - Meets the criteria in all respects with evidence to show this is fully embedded in the provider's practices</i>	5
<i>Excellent - Meets the criteria in all respects but is not yet fully embedded in provider practices.</i>	4
<i>Good - Meets the criteria in most respects and remains to be fully embedded.</i>	3
<i>Satisfactory - Does not yet meet the criteria, but evidence shows that the provider is working towards the objective.</i>	2
<i>Poor - Insufficient evidence to show that the provider meets the criteria</i>	1

If a provider does not meet the standard in many of the SEF criteria, they may need to pay the annual fee again to undergo a second inspection.

3. Feedback

Feedback will be based on both the evidence submitted and observations made during the inspection. This will be fed back on the day of inspection. Where a provider has met the required standard, the inspector will notify the provider that they are being recommended for the Gold badge.

Where a provider falls short in providing evidence the inspector will discuss this with the provider, during the inspection. The provider will then be contacted by Inspire2 Adventure for further information, prior to awarding of the gold badge.

Following the inspection the SEF form will be commented on by the inspector, this is reviewed by Inspire2Adventure before returning to the provider as a completed document. Successful providers will receive a confirmation letter, and a digital certificate issued by the AHOEC Gold Managing Group.

A copy of the completed SEF will also be retained by AHOEC.

Furthermore, providers will be asked to provide feedback on the Gold process, which will be reviewed and used by the Gold Standard Managing Group to improve the scheme.

4. Frequency of inspection and renewal of your Gold badge

The AHOEC Gold standard is valid for one year from the date of inspection. Providers may extend their standard for an additional year by submitting:

- A completed Interim Provider Declaration
- A current insurance certificate

If there have been no significant changes to the management or organisation, the badge will typically be extended without the need for reinspection.

However, if the Interim Provider Document indicates significant operational changes, a reinspection may be required. Examples of such changes include:

- Appointment of a new Head or Manager
- Change in ownership, operation, or purpose of the centre
- Significant increase or decrease in capacity
- Loss or revocation of external accreditation (e.g., NGB, AALS)
- Major changes in activity provision

In the event of any significant changes, it is the provider's responsibility to notify gold@ahoec.org

After two years, providers wishing to retain the Gold Badge must:

- Review and update their Self-Evaluation Form (SEF)
- Complete Section 8, which forms part of the quality assurance process and demonstrates continued high-performance worthy of the Gold Badge

Please note:

Providers must self-assess and assign a grade for each criterion in Section 8

For Area 8: Continuous Improvement, an average score of 3 is considered acceptable

5. Appeals and Complaints

Appeals or Complaints must initially be raised with the Inspire2Adventure and/or the Gold Standard Managing Group, who will endeavour to resolve the issue. If this is unsuccessful or not appropriate, the applicant should raise the issue directly with the Executive, who will review the application, inspection, or complaint. This must be done within 30 working days.

All contact should be made via gold@ahoec.org and will be recorded.

6. Key Personnel

A subcommittee of AHOEC manages the scheme called the Gold Standard Managing Group, which is appointed by and accountable to the AHOEC Executive. The Managing Group collaborates regularly online and meets at least once per year to consider the report provided by the inspection contractor. Currently, the members of the Managing Group are:

Teresa Thorp (Chair)

Trevor Quinn

Steve Turner

Ian Martin

Graham Burns

The Managing Group may be contacted directly through Teresa Thorp:

Teresa.Thorp@northyorks.gov.uk

**Association of Heads of Outdoor Education Centres
Gold Standard Accreditation**



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