

From



to



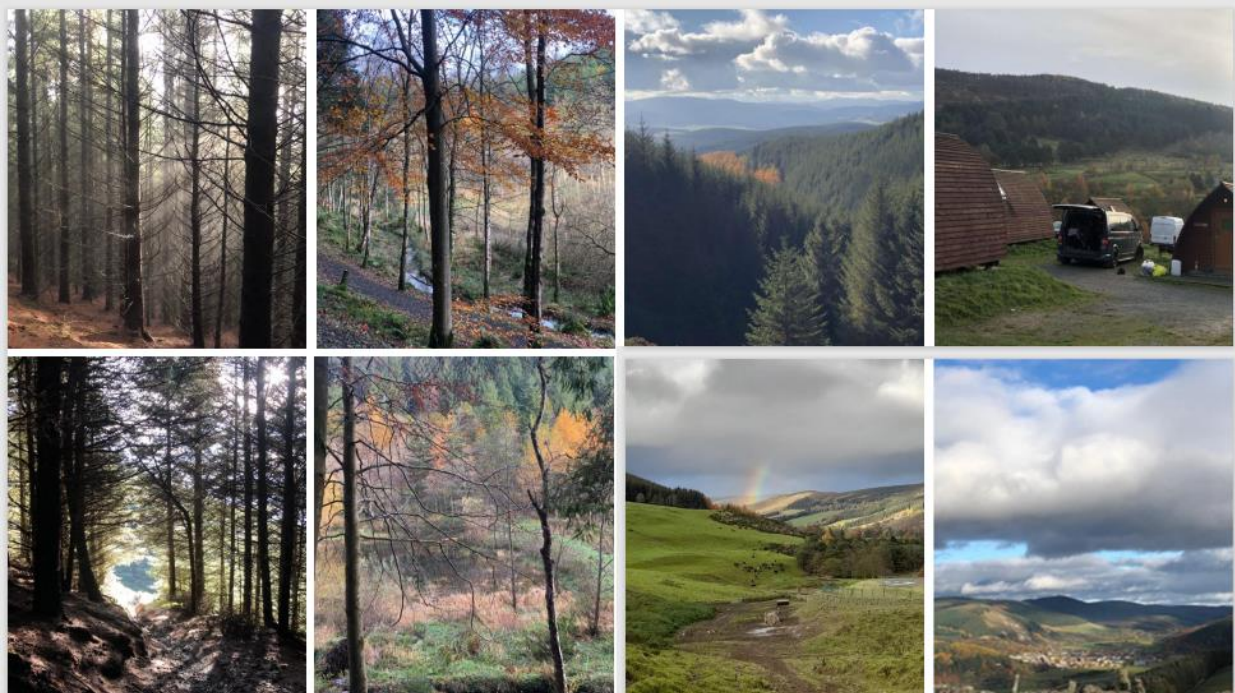
From 25 years of 'Friends of the Award' to 'Awards Plus' - a celebration

A triple-header event in late-November combined a celebration of 25 years of Friends of the Award, a launch of a new identity as Awards Plus, and a presentation of current work covering nature-based youth awards, Duke of Edinburgh's Award Expeditions and 1:1 Mentoring. Yes, it was an evening packed with personal reflections, visuals and 'aha!' moments of reconnection.

FOTA-Founder Peter Wright kicked things off with a reminisce about founding principles, radiating a perennial enthusiasm. Accessibility and inclusion, a mission to create resources, a focus on targeted support were original key ingredients and still evident in 2023. An approving nod from Peter is always welcome: "It was a joy to see all of the varied contributions to the proceedings - and to see the rebranded organisation. Many congratulations!"



Two groups gave presentations about their Silver DofE Qualifying Expeditions in the Scottish Borders. The words 'error', '5k detour', 'dilemma' and 'challenge' accompanied navigation descriptions. The Tweed Valley and Glentress plantation forest bike trails were explored more extensively than might have been expected. Still, the blue skies of group photos looked more like June than November and the enthusiasm for expedition aims shone through. Goats Team researched the history of the area and visited the Polish Map of Scotland war memorial whilst the Milky Law Team took an impressive photography lens to the scenery and wildlife.



Rob Bushby explained the journey from 'Friends of the Award' to 'Awards Plus' by way of consultation, partnering with Bold Studio's Brand for Growth programme, a name and logo debate (noting that this was no longer up for a vote), to arrive at a fully-fledged new identity. Consider Awards Plus launched!



The strong visuals in resources are down to photographer Anna Pultar. Her stunning PowerPoint of expeditions, navigation training and 1:1 Mentoring sessions transported the audience to an East Lothian summer evening, a verdant Dalkeith Country Park, the Water of Leith and a soggy Pentland Hills.



Duke of Edinburgh's Award participation has grown year-on-year at Gracemount High School. Teacher and DofE lead Laura Bird explained the nature of the [partnership with Awards Plus](#) and how this has made a difference. "They all turned up, every single one, no flakers. 32 pupils have been supported through their DofE journey, cost-free to the school, in a disadvantaged learning community. It's an opportunity they'd never have had without this support."

Gracemount High School & Friends of the Award/Awards Plus



In 2019 the school Head Teacher spotted a gap. Mr Hunter wanted Gracemount to offer Duke of Edinburgh's Award opportunities, to make sure that pupils weren't missing out on chances afforded to other school communities in Edinburgh. He recognised it as a route for fostering a sense of achievement and to help outdoor learning become more culturally ingrained in the learning community.

In that first year, with Miss Bird learning the DofE ropes alongside her Health and Food Technology teaching responsibilities, 5 pupils achieved their Bronze level of the Award. With a pandemic intervention, resumption in 2021 was with 6 participants, City of Edinburgh Council support and a partnership with Friends of the Award in place. (Note: name changed to Awards Plus from June 2023). The aim was to not only increase participation, but to develop staff skills and confidence to make delivery sustainable and an integrated part of the school's ethos.



Momentum built. By 2022 13 Bronze and 7 Silver levels were achieved by pupils. 2023 has seen a 50% increase, with 13 Bronze and 19 Silver completions. For around half it's been something to include on cvs and for applications to universities and jobs; for others the main focus has been on spending time learning new skills through enjoyable outdoor learning experiences.



Heather Hughes, 1:1 Mentoring Manager, then outlined the nature of this mental health support work, ably assisted by Amy and Jerome with Arran (plus artwork) and Erica in attendance. Amy spoke so well that her line "I always thought of myself as a shy person" got a chuckle from the audience. Jerome's deeply personal story captivated all. Post-event, a parent spoke of being "blown away by all the people doing so much to help young people".

Despite unavoidable absence, Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services/CAMHS Occupational Therapist Julie Blackwood reflected on her 15 years of referrals via Heather with awards ceremony *in absentia* styling. "For young people attending CAMHS their experience of mental health difficulties has often interrupted and disrupted their access to opportunities available to other young people of their age. Being able to access a range of activities and develop skills can help them in ways that can stay with them into later life. The benefit of this cannot and must not be underestimated. I have witnessed for myself the difference that this project makes not only to the young people they work with but also their families. For some, it has been transformational. Working with Awards Plus can be a stepping-stone for young people, introducing them to experiences that can help contribute to their recovery, sense of mastery and wellbeing."



Time for certificates. As if to validate a rationale for 'Awards Plus', recipients of Duke of Edinburgh's Awards, Heritage Hero Awards, John Muir Awards, National Navigation Awards, and Ramblers Scotland Out There Awards were represented.

To wrap up, Chairman Patrick Neville outlined that ever-present need for a small charity to have security and funding and a [2023-25 Strategy](#). "We've looked back, celebrated our work in 2023, now we need to look ahead with confidence and ambition." Trustee Dave Pyper thanked all the speakers, spanning decades and generations, with a heartfelt nod to the "inspirational" reflections of young people on their experiences and the impact of their relationship with Friends of the Award/Awards Plus.

A parent commented "I was completely inspired by the young people's stories, and how evident it was that this kind of support makes a difference. It's been a wonderful representation of what support and achievement can look like for different people." A final word goes to a young person as they left: "Yeah, it was alright".

Rob Bushby, Awards Plus Chief Executive, December 2023

Thanks to all who attended, presented and contributed to a memorable event. Special thanks to City of Edinburgh Council and the Outdoor Learning Team for hosting at Bangholm Outdoor Learning Centre.