

Bring me the child and I will show you the pilot

Leia Fee on how to get young people flying



GETTING more young people into flying has been an interest of mine ever since noticing at 25 that I was almost always the youngest person in the room. I was also usually the only woman, but that's a whole other issue!

I got involved with the LAA's Youth & Education Support branch, Scout flying days and aerocamps, visiting local schools and Brownie packs with flying foam plate chuck gliders and stomp rockets, and sneaking aviation-disguised-as-maths into my own curriculum, teaching 16-25 year-old apprentices ICT, network engineering and "employability".

After reading in *MF* about the current state of play with the Microlight Flying Foundation and New Horizons project, I thought I'd write down some of the challenges and issues I've noticed over the past 10 years, along with some ideas for where MFF, clubs and members could put their funds and energy to good use.

Media drama about child protection and health and safety puts off both parents and potential volunteers. Insurers are more risk-averse with the result that everyone who uses them – flying schools, clubs, airfields, youth groups and aviation organizations – are forced to become so as well.

There's a perception that the CRB check (now DBS check) is more onerous and difficult than it actually is. It's a slightly fiddly form and takes a while, but it's really not a huge drama.

The same goes for risk assessments – they're far more common sense-based than most people realize, and a lot of guidance is available.

Issues with getting info into schools

Years of education policy have made hands-on subjects feel second class. Technology subjects have less time given to them, and science is increasingly "read what should happen in the experiment rather than do it".

Access to schools as guest speakers seems to be a closed shop unless you have an existing contact with an existing and enthused teacher. Schools are so constantly assessed and inspected and measured that there is very very little space for "extras" in the curriculum unless you can prove it's going to hit some target tick-box. School trips have also been curtailed through health and safety concerns.

All this is in spite of the fact that STEM (Science Technology, Engineering & Maths) is back on the political agenda – but most teachers are unsure where to start and resort to rolling cotton-reel cars down slopes, when flying machines would be a far more engaging and exciting demonstration of the "forces" section of the science curriculum, for instance.

Potential actions:

- Form a network of members willing to go into school and talk to either pupils or teachers (along the model of STEM Ambassadors).

- Produce an info pack for those volunteers to use.
- Produce a pack clearly outlining for teachers where aviation fits into the curriculum themes.
- Produce a pack which could be used by school in service training days on how to use aviation as a “hook” for STEM activities.
- Produce a plan for a field trip to an aerodrome which could be used as is, including risk assessments etc, to make trips as easy as possible. (Ones already exist for in use in Scouting, which could be adapted).
- Submit any resources created to places like the teaching resource bank on the *Times Education Supplement* website.
- Consider (it’s expensive!) attending major education shows such as BETT, The Education Show, The Skills Show or The Big Bang Fair.

Air cadets and air scouts, due to lack of instructors, have gradually both become more driven by adventurous activities and thus less specifically aviation-themed.

Potential actions

- Form a network of members willing to go into schools as above.
- Consider displaying at major airshows as well as trade events.

Guiding, which ought to be a good route into getting girls on board, has no equivalent to the Scouting air activities badges.

Several large organizations (Rolls-Royce for one) have produced branded versions of the Guiding Science Investigator badge.

Potential actions

- Liaise with Girl Guiding UK to produce an aviation-themed pack of resources to cover the science badges.
- Form a network of members as above.

Most people only take up an activity if they see a critical mass of “people like them” doing it, and flying doesn’t have that on either the age or the gender front (though microlighting seems better anecdotally than GA as a whole).

The frequent response to this (I see it in the equally gender-skewed IT sector) is: “But no one’s stopping them”. It doesn’t work. Passive “not being anti” isn’t the same as active encouragement. ▷

Facing page And when I grow up I’m going to get a real one...

This page, from top MW7 at Swansea; so what does this red button do, mister?; and Leia with scouts and X’Air at Aerocamp



“One of the lads unexpectedly turned out to be such a natural at working with the younger kids that we ended up offering him work experience as a primary school teaching assistant”

- ▷ What percentage of the faces in the *This is Micro-lighting* or, over on the other side, the *LAA Today* freebies, are white middle-aged men?

Potential actions

- Carry out an “audit” of current marketing materials making sure that all the target groups for increased representation are represented in a balance that reflects what we’d like to achieve.
- Prioritize magazine contributions from the target demographic.
- Add an award and/or additional prizes in the competitions for achievement by members of the target demographic and make sure they’re consistently awarded.

A lot of the programmes that already exist to promote STEM are pretty much competing with each other for volunteers and funding. Volunteers in general (and pilots in particular!) are not particularly easily led, hence the diverse massive range of organizations doing similar things in their own way. All of the above ideas need people as well as funds.

Potential actions

- Create a “menu” of activities showing different levels of commitment so that members can easily see what is involved and how little (or how much) time they would need to commit to help out.
- Create some material showing the benefits to all of us as a flying community of the goodwill and better PR generated by such activities. (If the local airfield is “That place my kid’s Scout troop had a fantastic time” not “That place where those people in aeroplanes that sound like strimmers mess about”, then we’re winning.)
- Make sure the stand at trade shows includes information about how to volunteer as well as simply giving out information.

- Make sure the latest news from the youth and education side of things appears every in every issue of the magazine, however short an update.

Where to start?

Obviously none of the above can happen without hands on deck, so the first priority has to be establishing a network of volunteers and finding out what interests and skills they’re bringing with them.

The story so far

As you can see from the photos, I’ve been busy already.

The Aerocamp ones were BelleVue this year. The little red X’Air (matching my hat) which Scouts are in is half mine and being used for the conclusion of a base towards the aircraft instruments part of their Aeronautics badge.

The models they’re waving in the air are a Project Airfix job lot which was used as evening activities in the hangar and a competition. The navigation they’re so intent upon is the route they were later to fly.

In Swansea, I gave my 16-17 year-old students the task of organizing the static display of a donated MW7 as a project for their NVQ Communications qualification. They planned it, costed it, learned about the aircraft in order to rig it and be able to talk to the public about it, manned the stand, wrote all the press releases for it and displayed it in the grounds of the local industrial museum.

It was a massive learning curve for them and they were working way out of their comfort zone, but they did superbly.

One of the lads unexpectedly turned out to be such a natural at working with the younger kids that we ended up offering him work experience as a primary school teaching assistant! □



Right

Scouts at Aerocamp with paper planes. Well, you gotta start somewhere...