

A photograph of two young boys practicing archery outdoors. The boy in the foreground is wearing a dark blue sweater and is focused on his bow. The boy in the background is wearing a black t-shirt with a Sonic the Hedgehog graphic and glasses. They are standing in front of a wooden archery range with green foliage in the background.

Outdoor Learning Policy Report

September 2023

UK YOUTH

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Acknowledgements

We would like to express our sincere gratitude to the Scouts, Girlguiding UK, the Outward Bound Trust, Duke of Edinburgh Award (DofE), and the Institute for Outdoor Learning for their insights in helping to form this piece of work.

The aim of this report is to share our recommendations at UK Youth for the Government in order to support both the youth sector and the outdoor learning sector to provide greater access to outdoor learning for young people.

Foreword from Robin Millar MP

I grew up in the beautiful scenery of north Wales and hold cherished memories of long days paddling in muddy streams, exploring plunging valleys under towering mountainsides and scrambling around rugged coastlines. Visiting ancient castles and witnessing great feats of engineering – spanning, supporting and clinging to those same valleys and mountains – led me to an interest and the start of a career in engineering and old buildings. These experiences in the great outdoors have left an indelible mark – handling uncertainty, discovering abilities and testing resourcefulness have taught me lessons I rely on to this day.

The importance of learning outdoors cannot be overstated; on young minds and lives in particular. Every time we step outdoors we encounter the world around and the potential is there for journeys of discovery, creativity, and adventure. Curating these experiences helps forge memories that will accompany our young citizens throughout their lives. To those who struggle in the traditional classroom environment, it offers means to engage with education, rather than merely endure it. Timeless moments, not just moments of time.

During the depths of the Covid-19 pandemic, it became clear that outdoor learning was not recognised as the resource it should be. I set up the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Outdoor Learning from a conviction that outdoor learning needed to be “at the table”. Our mission has become to help the sector – and its many different organisations working within it – to untangle the intricacies of parliament, governance and navigate public policy making.

And that is the point of intersection with this timely and helpful report from UK Youth. The report serves as a testament to the immense potential of outdoor learning – for physical and mental health, for career and social outcomes, and as a source of lifelong inspiration.

Crucially, UK Youth have identified this important call on government to create a structured engagement with a responsible point of contact. If we know where outdoor learning plants its feet, then from there we can forge paths to all of those departments that shape outdoor learning – whether it is our national parks, historical sites and access to the countryside or licensing, matters of safety, educational and youth policy and more.

And as we shape outdoor learning, it will then shape our youth – enriching their education and create experiences that will stay with them forever.

Robin Millar MP

Chairman, All-Party Parliamentary Group for Outdoor Learning



About UK Youth

At UK Youth, our vision is that all young people are equipped to thrive and empowered to contribute at every stage of their lives. We believe youth work and outdoor learning are essential tools to help young people navigate the different challenges they face and set them up with skills for life.

Over ten million young people are currently unable to access this life changing, and even life-saving, support. We can't change this by doing more of the same. At UK Youth, we bring together young people, youth workers, and outdoor learning with business leaders, teachers, social workers, doctors, policy makers and other professionals to learn from each other, spread effective ways to support young people, and campaign for social change.

Our approach is firmly grounded in the insights derived from our extensive youth network, consisting of over 8,000 youth organisations across the UK. These organisations serve as a crucial connection to young people, offering firsthand perspectives on the genuine needs of young people today.

We care about youth work and outdoor learning because we see how it improves the physical and mental health outcomes of young people, and has further benefits for the community, such as deterring young people from engaging in antisocial behaviour. We also know how important the social aspects of having 'adventures away from home' and being in nature can offer a young person, and would like to see these benefits for all young people.



Outdoor Learning Approach

As part of our commitment to young people, for over 75 years UK Youth has operated our OAs part of our commitment to young people, for over 75 years UK Youth has operated our Outdoor Centre at Avon Tyrrell, dedicated to the continuous development of young people. We use our beautiful centre within the New Forest National Park to allow individuals to 'Experience, Learn and Develop' giving them the opportunities they need to reach their full potential, as well as test innovative youth development content, train a new generation of outdoor learning instructors through apprenticeships, and demonstrate good practice for the wider outdoor learning sector.

As well as running our own outdoor centre we also support the youth sector as a whole. This includes our work as part of the Back Youth Alliance, a network of youth organisations, many of whom work within the outdoor sector (such as the Scouts, Duke of Edinburgh Award, or Sea Cadets), or through our support for youth organisations across the country that are doing forms of outdoor learning. This year in partnership with the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) we launched a £600,000 Adventures Away From Home Fund for outdoor learning providers to work with disadvantaged young people in England. This fund reached 45 providers and over 3500 young people within a few months.

What is Outdoor Learning

At UK Youth, we define outdoor learning as experiential learning within an outdoor environment to support a young person's personal, social, and educational development, improve health and wellbeing, physical literacy, and develop environmental awareness. The outdoor space in which learning takes place is an integral part of the learning process.

We use an 'experience, learn, develop' approach where young people learn through what they do, what they encounter, and what they discover. Delivered by our experienced outdoor learning practitioners, the experience is holistic and the impact comes from looking at an individual's whole self, their individual capabilities and outcomes.

The location in which the outdoor learning activity takes place ranges greatly, from mountains and national parks, to a local green space or park, or even the patch of grass next to a youth centre itself. Whilst environmental engagement and awareness is a key component of outdoor learning, not all outdoor learning scenarios take place explicitly in the natural environment. For example, undertaking an adventurous activity indoors such as climbing an indoor constructed climbing wall, also provides the opportunity and experience that outdoor learning creates.

“I really enjoyed getting involved in things that I don't often get to do outdoors.”

**-Adventures Away From Home Participant,
14, new forest**

The Importance of Outdoor Learning

Outdoor learning is a tool utilised by youth workers, teachers and individuals, to help develop and support young people. Impacts include the acquisition of essential life skills, the development of young people's health, wellbeing and physical literacy, and the increase in environmental awareness and connection to nature.

UK Youth's programmes, Outdoor Activators and Active Youth, both demonstrated the benefit of outdoor learning on physical activity, with Outdoor Activator participants showing a 19 percentage point increase in engagement with physical activity, and Active Youth participants having a 38 percentage point increase in their self-esteem when doing physical activity. We know that outdoor learning can positively contribute to a young person's overall physical and mental wellbeing.

We recognise the synergy between youth work and outdoor learning and by intentionally bringing these together, we feel that their combination can help support a young person's personal, social, and educational development. The interaction between a young person and the outdoor practitioner or youth worker as a trusted adult, maximises the potential for learning and has significant benefits for the young person in having someone to talk to.

The Adventures Away from Home Fund evaluation found that nine out of ten youth group leaders reported enhanced confidence, self-reliance and independence and increased happiness amongst the young people they were supporting to attend, and over eight out of ten youth group leaders developed more trusted relationships with young people, increased confidence in their roles and abilities and feeling greater pride in their role. 98% of youth group leaders shared that their experience as 'excellent' or 'very good', highlighting the unique environments, the adventurous experience and the chance to engage their young people through the outdoors as valuable parts of the offer.

Regarding the economic benefits for society, the forecast Social Return on Investment (SROI) for learning outside the classroom in the natural environment is £4.32 for every £1 invested ([Natural England, 2022](#)). This is classified by the Government's Value for Money metrics as a 'very high' return on investment ([Department for Transport, 2017](#)).



“It was great to be part of a team encouraging and enabling young people to take on challenges and experiences in an outdoor setting was wonderful to see how they developed skills and made new friendships.”

-Youth Group Leader, Adventures Away From Home

Lack of Equitable Access to Outdoor Learning

Despite the evidence we have on the benefits of outdoor learning for young people, we also know that the provision and access to opportunities for outdoor learning is not equal across the country, or across groups of young people themselves. There are a wide range of barriers which have been identified that prevent young people from being able to meaningfully engage in outdoor learning, and its associated benefits.

Our recent Adventures Away from Home Fund programme evaluation demonstrated some of the challenges facing young people with accessing outdoor learning, one third of all youth group leaders on the programme had not accessed outdoor learning before. 55% highlighted financial costs as a barrier and 20% identified the need for transport preventing them from accessing the benefits of outdoor learning.

Based on original applications to the Adventures Away from Home Fund, we know that there is unfunded demand of outdoor learning experiences. We could have reached an additional 5,092 young people (on top of the original 3,584 young people who were funded to undertake outdoor learning), this would have cost an additional £1.36mn to deliver, showing the value of outdoor learning for young people and the youth sector.

This report aims to identify the barriers young people face to engaging with outdoor learning, and looks at how they can be tackled by policy makers to help open up the value of outdoor learning to all young people which is a lifelong positive experience. We know that the impact of being immersed in nature, developing resilience, and learning life skills for the future is just as important now as it has ever been for all young people.

“I can do a lot more than play video games. I don’t usually go outside but now after the experience I go outside a lot more often.”

- Adventures Away From Home Participant, 11, Dorchester



Our Policy Recommendations

Ultimately, we believe that young people should have access to meaningful outdoor learning experiences, with a choice of activity, a diverse range of delivery partners, and engagement delivered in combination with youth work. We know this change requires significant funding, and a long term strategy for workforce development. We can't solve this in the short term, it is complex and requires long term solutions, but we feel these recommendations will take the sector towards achieving this goal. It is not just up to Government to deliver, but Government should enable charities and businesses to work in partnership to create change across the youth and outdoor learning sectors. Through our research we have established a set of key policy recommendations that we believe could make a huge difference to young people across the country. Where possible we have made clear where in Government we believe change is best placed to occur.

- 1 The Department of Education and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport should work together to lead the development of a cross-governmental strategy for young people, with outdoor learning as an integral part.**
- 2 The Department for Culture, Media and Sport should build on the success of the Adventures Away from Home Fund by providing funding for outdoor learning experiences for young people, in partnership with the youth sector.**
- 3 The Department for Health and Social Care should work with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to meaningfully incorporate and resource outdoor learning into methods for green and blue social prescribing for young people.**
- 4 Local authorities should consider how local public health strategies can recognise and support outdoor learning as a key part in ensuring physical and mental wellbeing for young people.**
- 5 The Department for Culture, Media and Sport should work alongside the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, Historic England and the National Lottery Heritage Fund to support charities as custodians of historic properties used for outdoor learning, including through the provision of dedicated capital funding.**
- 6 The Department for Culture, Media and Sport should invest in workforce strategy development for the youth sector and outdoor learning sector, and support the youth sector to deliver accredited training for youth workers on outdoor learning.**
- 7 The Department of Education should meaningfully incorporate and strengthen understanding of outdoor learning, and how to best engage with it, into teacher training.**
- 8 The Government should introduce a specific brief to the Minister for Schools role with the Department of Education to take explicit responsibility for outdoor learning.**
- 9 The Department of Education should work with the Department for Culture, Media and Sport to enable partnership working between schools, youth organisations and outdoor learning providers to increase collaboration in local areas, as part of an educational enrichment offer.**
- 10 The Department for Culture, Media and Sport should commission further research into current levels of engagement with outdoor learning, gaps in provision, and outcomes for young people.**

Methodology

For this policy report, a variety of policy research methods have been utilised to gain a better understanding of the barriers associated with access to outdoor learning for young people, consolidate information and to help develop the associated recommendations.

Literature Review

UK Youth undertook a literature review to fully understand and consolidate previous research on the benefits of outdoor learning, and the challenges with providing access to all young people. This is viewed with a particular focus on outdoor learning through youth work. This review included a variety of sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, previous UK Youth surveys, and grey literature from Government bodies. The initial themes identified in this review were; socio-economic and demographic barriers, access to green spaces, leader confidence and support, cross-sector understanding of outdoor learning, and cost. The findings of this work informed the discussions with stakeholders.

Consultation with Stakeholders

In-depth interviews were conducted by UK Youth in August 2023 with individuals who have expertise of outdoor learning, and its intersection with youth work. Initial themes that came out of these conversations were; language, funding, location, skills, and infrastructure and facilities. We would like to express our sincere gratitude to the Scouts, Girlguiding UK, the Outward Bound Trust, Duke of Edinburgh Award, and the Institute for Outdoor Learning for their insight.

Direct Activity Observation

As part of this research we also spoke directly to our expert colleagues who work at our activity centre, Avon Tyrrell, about their experiences and views. We observed young people on sessions at Avon Tyrrell, and utilised previous case studies collected on their experiences. We also volunteered at an activity centre in their sessions to learn from direct delivery of outdoor learning.

Adventures Away From Home Fund

Insights were also captured and fed in from the evaluation of UK Youth's recent [Adventures Away From Home Fund](#), funded by DCMS. This fund provided bursaries for over 3500 young people to engage with outdoor learning, and was delivered through 45 outdoor activity centres.

Limitations

The main limitation for this piece of work was a short time frame for collecting evidence, this has led to a small sample size in terms of organisations interviewed for their reflections, and a reduced range of organisations including in reference to locality and size. Across the wider landscape, there is also limited access to data on this topic, particularly focusing on the impact of outdoor learning through youth work, and longitudinal data impacts on long term outcomes for young people. Previous research and survey evidence used for the literature review was not initially collected to aid this specific policy research question.

Current Policy Landscape

Our recommendations highlight what we believe needs to be done to help support the outdoor learning sector. Policy work focused on how to improve access to outdoor learning for young people has been considered by Government over the past decade. However, recent contextual challenges, including the COVID-19 pandemic and cost of living crisis, have led to young people missing out on the positive benefits of outdoor learning.

Previous intentions from policy makers have been good and there is an understanding that young people will benefit from access to green spaces, awareness of the natural environment, and the social skills learned from new surroundings and activities. However, the onus often remains on the young person's family to facilitate this, meaning many children miss out. The importance of Government-led initiatives in this area is clear, and offers a relatively low cost solution to issues impacting young people across the country.

On an international level, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child ([United Nations, 1990](#)) defines that education of children should include respect for the natural environment, and recognises the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child, and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts. Indeed, the right of children to have a meaningful relationship with nature has been referred to as the 'forgotten human right' ([Heritage Council](#)).



In the UK, the most recent policy implemented by Government on outdoor learning is the National Youth Guarantee, pledging for all young people to be given access to more activities, trips away from home and volunteering opportunities by 2025, backed by an investment of £560mn. Adventures away from home was identified by young people in the DCMS survey for the youth review as the second highest priority for young people coming out of the COVID-19 pandemic, after weekly clubs and activities ([Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 2022](#)). The pledge for adventures away from home as part

of Outdoor learning has been referenced in other areas of Government policy, including the commitment from the Department for Education (DfE) and the Department of Environment, Farming and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) in their 2018 Green Future 25 Year Plan, to enable children in England, particularly those from disadvantaged areas, to be close to nature in order to support their health and wellbeing ([DEFRA, 2018](#)). Alongside this, Natural England's strategic direction outlines strong advocacy for developing outdoor opportunities for young people as part of their personal, social, and emotional development ([Natural England](#)). Despite these promising developments, more needs to be done to make outdoor learning an integral part of every child's education, particularly by the timeframe set by the National Youth Guarantee of 2025. Too many young people are missing out on the opportunity to benefit from outdoor learning.

Some of these policy changes have been UK wide, whilst some areas of work have been more focused on one or more of the devolved nations. There is difference and discrepancy in policy approaches at a national level across the nations of the UK, as well as at a local level within different councils. A number of local councils run activity centres as part of their youth provision and provide access to young people, but many do not, and it can often feel like a postcode lottery for access to facilities.



At UK Youth we are also currently working with the National Citizen Service (NCS), DofE and the Centre for Education and Youth on research around educational enrichment partnerships. The NCS programme exists to engage, unite and empower young people, building confidence no matter where they are from or what their background is. A key part of the programme is adventures away from home, providing residential opportunities at a low cost with bursaries available. The aim of this piece of work on educational enrichment is to explore what works to strengthen collaboration and coordination between formal education and the youth sector, and to increase young people's access to quality enrichment and non-formal learning opportunities.

As highlighted, the responsibility for policy relating to outdoor learning, is fragmented, sitting across a range of Government departments and public bodies, including: DCMS, DfE, Natural England, DEFRA, and the Department for Health and Social Care (DHSC), as well as within the devolved nations and at local authority level. This makes collaborative and holistic approaches to supporting outdoor learning more challenging, and it is clear that a cross-Governmental strategy with clear ownership is needed to support the sector.

Recommendation 1: The Department for Education and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport should work together to lead the development of a cross-governmental strategy for young people, with outdoor learning as an integral part.

Findings

Language

One of the dominant challenges with articulating and sharing the positive benefit of outdoor learning, is a lack of clear awareness amongst the general population of what outdoor learning entails, and numerous synonyms that are used across the sector. These include outdoor education, outdoor activities, adventures, adventurous activities, etc. Where confusion lies on terminology within the outdoor learning sector itself, this creates more challenges for cross-sector understanding and engagement.

The lack of consistency with language around this area of activity can create barriers for young people in developing their own literacy of what being and learning in an outdoor space or natural environment can look like, whilst also at times conveying messages that lack clarity to policy makers and stakeholders who are not as embedded in the day to day work of the sector, there is a lack of consistent and clear messaging. This also presents a challenging for collating evidence of impact and disseminating effective practice, if there is limited collective understanding of shared practice as a basis to build upon.

Increasing the understanding of what outdoor learning consists of, and its value to young people, would prompt significant benefits to both the general public and policy makers. For young people and youth workers to identify their activity as fitting into the outdoor learning space could help increase acknowledgement of the need, and drive support for increasing provision to more young people, as current awareness of outdoor learning in mainstream youth work is lower than it could be.

“Just what a fantastic opportunity this is, the instructors were great, the young people gained so much from the experience, and we’d love to do it again, with different opportunities and young people.” - Youth Group Leader, Adventures Away From Home

Cost

Outdoor learning is currently funded through a very mixed funding model that comprises family payments, school budgets, local authority grants, bursaries funded by charitable foundations, statutory grants, and commercial activities that subsidise charitable activity. Not all young people have access to all of these funding streams. Many organisations in the outdoor learning sector are commercial, and therefore have priorities and responsibilities associated with ensuring sufficient income, that leads to knock on impacts for participants.

Limited resources, across financial, physical, capacity and time, create the most impenetrable barriers to engagement from young people in outdoor learning (Youth Link Scotland & John Muir webinar, 2020). The particular issue of cost and funding has been frequently identified and highlighted as a barrier preventing young people from benefitting fully from outdoor learning. There has been significant pressure on the funding model for the sector, including as an effect of the decrease in bookings over the COVID-19 pandemic.

There are a number of examples of funding being used to subsidise cost for young people, or provide bursaries that facilitate engagement. UK Youth’s [Adventures Away From Home Fund](#) was a £600k grant fund that provided bursaries for young people facing disadvantage to access outdoor learning

experiences, as well as aimed to foster stringer connections between youth organisations and outdoor learning providers. The fund was provided by DCMS and was delivered by the UK Youth Outdoor Learning Team. Based on original applications to the Adventures Away from Home Fund, we know that there is unfunded demand of outdoor learning experiences. We could have reached an additional 5,092 young people (on top of the original 3,584 young people who were funded to undertake outdoor learning), and that this would have cost an additional £1.36mn to deliver, showing the value of outdoor learning for young people and the youth sector.

Funding and grants have also been used by organisations to provide equipment, removing the need for young people to front these costs, and reducing the possibility of social exclusion felt by not having a particular brand or certain kit. Where possible, policy makers should look at funding that can provide access to individual young people to engage in outdoor learning, however it is also important to look at the additional requirements for each young person to meaningfully engage in outdoor learning, such as the need for a supporting adult or adapted transport, and consider long term financial impact and sustainability in approaches.

The Adventures Away From Home Fund evaluation found that funding did not always cover all required attendees, for example, additional trusted adults, to attend (although some outdoor learning providers also provided additional bursaries outside of the Adventures Away From Home grant provision). It is also important to consider how funding training for youth leaders, teachers, and other trusted adults facilitating outdoor learning could help promote long term impacts and create a sustainable development of knowledge and skills which could go on to benefit a wider cohort of young people. Long term, predictable funding is incredibly important for retaining skilled staff within the sector, as it is often difficult and expensive to replace these individuals, investment in training and the quality of facilities is required.

The cost of running outdoor learning provision was evident at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, when some centres closed overnight and many did not have access to sufficient levels of funding to support them to remain running. Many organisations shut down during this period, or sold off sites and decreased their capacity for activity, including local authority provision. Recently, Girlguiding UK have decided to close five national activity centres, citing the pressures of ongoing costs. The Institute of Outdoor Learning's COVID-19 Pandemic survey (IOL, 2020) found that over 70% of respondents have made up to 20% of their workforce redundant during 2020, which combined with a gap in recruitment, created a current skills shortage of qualified staff members.

Compounding these challenges, salaries in the outdoor learning sector are also often quite low, creating difficulties in developing a sustained and engaged workforce, who remain in the industry. This creates challenges with making this type of work a more long term career and embeds barriers to supporting a more diverse workforce.

Recommendation 2: The Department for Culture, Media and Sport should build on the success of the Adventures Away from Home Fund by providing funding for outdoor learning experiences for young people, in partnership with the youth sector.

“Excellent opportunity for us to use resources that are otherwise unused for communities that may not be able to access us otherwise.”

**- Outdoor Learning Provider,
Adventures Away From Home**



Inclusive Provision

All young people should be given the opportunity to be involved in meaningful and inclusive outdoor learning practice, no matter their background. However, we know this is currently not always the case. Anecdotal evidence from the outdoor learning sector and youth sector has shown that the perception of outdoor learning is often that it is for a certain demographic of young people, and that access requirements may not be met.

We know that barriers to engagement can be related to socio-economic background as well as demographic background. For example, young people from families on low income, minoritised ethnic backgrounds, refugees or asylum seekers or with disabilities face greater barriers to accessing outdoor learning as these groups tend to have less access to appropriate green space, find costs prohibitive or lack appropriate equipment to meaningfully engage in outdoor learning experiences (Her Majesty's Government, 2011). Being able to build rapport with young people is core to engagement, with practices in the outdoor learning environment drawing heavily from youth work practices. However, we know there is still a long way to go in changing perceptions and opening up access.



Through feedback from our own UK Youth network and through additional research ([Waite et al, 2023](#)) we also know that the lack of role models and people that young people can relate to in the outdoor learning sector can lead to a perception of exclusion relating to a range of factors such as gender, culture, race, disability and others. This visual impact can lead to young people feeling like certain activities and environments are not for them. This also contributes to a lack of diversity amongst staff members and volunteers, following the impact of young people not seeing themselves in the role. There is also often a lack of opportunity of, or signposting to, more local provision for the young person to continue engaging and develop a career in outdoor learning.

Disabled young people face additional barriers, relating to adjustments required in both transport and provision of activity, and accessible equipment. We know that not all providers of outdoor learning have accessible equipment, but provision is getting better across the sector. There are further faith based barriers, including those associated with the accommodation and catering provision, such as ensuring the provision of helmets suitable for young people wearing turbans and providing halal or kosher food, as examples. The provision of changing rooms and kit for those who are non-binary or transgender can also create barriers for some young people.

Young people with mental health challenges also have additional barriers to accessing outdoor

learning, despite the benefits of outdoor learning and being in the natural environment in developing mentally healthy young people. There has been reference in recent years to green and blue social prescribing to use nature and the outdoors to address societal challenges that may be useful to explore in regards to improving access. Green and blue social prescribing is the practice of supporting people in engaging in nature-based interventions and activities to improve their mental health. It has been shown to be an effective intervention, including for those with pre-existing mental health problems (Coventry et al., 2021).

Recommendation 3: The Department for Health and Social Care should work with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to meaningfully incorporate and resource outdoor learning into methods for green and blue social prescribing for young people.

Recommendation 4: Local authorities should consider how local public health strategies can recognise and support outdoor learning as a key part in ensuring physical and mental wellbeing for young people.

“I think you must try something before telling yourself you can’t do it.”

- Adventures Away From Home
Participant, 14, cumbria

Location

Outdoor learning is often associated with wild and open landscapes, and scenery that is not within close reach, or accessible to all young people across the UK. Youth organisations are often more engaged with outdoor learning where their local geography traditionally lends itself to these activities. However, outdoor learning and its associated benefits can be appropriately and meaningfully delivered in a range of natural settings, from a green space in a park or local youth club, to activity provision within a national park. Reframing this narrative is important for ensuring that outdoor learning is seen as accessible to everyone, and also contributes to the reduction in cost of provision and the associated environmental impact of frequent travel.

Whilst specific facilities are not always required to engage with outdoor learning, having knowledge of where local facilities are located and knowing where to go can be a big step in supporting youth organisations to engage in outdoor learning. This knowledge is often passed on between leaders when individuals move on, but requires overlap of roles and a drive to retain information. There is a need for increased access to safe green spaces in all areas of the UK, with sufficient land access provision in the countryside, in order to facilitate outdoor learning engagement for all young people.

Activity centres themselves are also inherently costly buildings to run, often repurposed manor houses or estates, the conversion to activity centre creates large expenses for ongoing maintenance and repairs. As noted, some local councils run outdoor education centres, but it can be a postcode lottery around what facilities are available to young people in their area. Buildings can often have enhanced protection and planning permission, especially where they are old and potentially listed properties, and are often located in national parks or areas where increased planning permission is required to carry out necessary repair work on infrastructure. Whilst not all outdoor learning needs to be based at an activity centre, we know a lot of provision remains in these settings, particularly residential. Furthermore, the ability for youth organisations to store equipment and kit at their usual meeting place is also varied, and can create difficulties with investing in long term approaches to outdoor learning.

The associated perceived barriers with the need for certain locations create a challenge for many young people, particularly around transport challenges and the costs associated, including the need

for minibuses (D1) for volunteers or staff who plan to drive the young people. The upkeep of a youth group's own minibus can be very high and has grown with inflation in recent years, with these facilities becoming less widespread across the youth sector.

Recommendation 5: The Department for Culture, Media and Sport should work alongside the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, Historic England and the National Lottery Heritage Fund to support charities as custodians of historic properties used for outdoor learning, including through the provision of dedicated capital funding.

“Residentials are such powerful things! The conversations, skills and friendships that are forged on them are transformative! Thank you so much for helping make this possible!” - Youth Group Leader, Adventures Away From Home



Leader Confidence and Skillset

In order to provide sustainable provision for young people, support for leaders is essential. Many leaders to youth groups, both voluntary and paid staff, are keen to provide outdoor learning opportunities but may lack the knowledge and skills required. Other leaders may need further support on seeing the benefit of outdoor learning in their provision, or being able to facilitate engagement if it requires working outside of their usual hours.

Youth workers have identified to us that they have concerns about their own ability to manage risk and safeguard young people in settings they may be unfamiliar with. Safeguarding is a significant and fundamental need for outdoor learning provision, especially where residentials are involved, requiring enhanced training and confidence in adults being able to manage risk and support young people adequately. Many leaders may also struggle to support residential experiences for young people, or travel away from home due to caring commitments or other responsibilities.

Youth workers have also previously identified to UK Youth the lack of support and networks with other youth workers engaging in outdoor learning as a barrier to building confidence in developing their practice, as well as the knowledge of how to use outdoor learning in a meaningful way. Where a school or youth club have a teacher or youth worker who is confident in outdoor learning, engagement is much more likely.

Organisations such as the Scouts and Girlguiding have seen that leaders have been more inclined to buy in services because they lack the skills or confidence to deliver directly, such

as using pre-pitched camping and activities packages. This has knock on implications for the cost of outdoor learning provision to the young person and their families, at a time when affording these activities is difficult for many families, and impossible for others. There has also been a push for support structures and networks for youth workers themselves to develop their skills and confidence in outdoor learning, and learn from sharing best practice.

It may also be useful to consider formal training for staff across the youth sector to engage with outdoor learning, whilst acknowledging challenges with time and capacity to engage with this in day to day work, as well as the importance of activities and providers reflecting the communities they support. The national governing bodies responsible for the various outdoor activities and sports could be a way to channel this training and engagement.

Ensuring outdoor learning is embedded into the school curriculum, in a flexible approach, that allows all young people to engage in a way that best suits their needs is likely to lead to an increase in engagement. The benefits in terms of skillset and mental wellbeing for young people could significantly help prepare young people for the future, but require teachers to be confident and able to lead change in this way. This is a prime example of where formal schooling and youth work can work in partnership, and complement each other to support young people. Schools should work closely with local providers, encouraged by a curriculum that recognises outdoor learning, to develop and offer suitable provision for all young people and not inadvertently lead to the homogenisation of the outdoor learning sector.

Recommendation 6: The Department for Culture, Media and Sport should invest in workforce strategy development for the youth sector and outdoor learning sector, and support the youth sector to deliver accredited training for youth workers on outdoor learning.

Recommendation 7: The Department of Education should meaningfully incorporate and strengthen understanding of outdoor learning, and how to best engage with it, into teacher training.

Recommendation 8: The Government should introduce a specific brief to the Minister for Schools role with the Department of Education to take explicit responsibility for outdoor learning.

Recommendation 9: The Department of Education should work with the Department for Culture, Media and Sport to enable partnership working between schools, youth organisations and outdoor learning providers to increase collaboration in local areas, as part of an educational enrichment offer.

“This was an INCREDIBLE experience for these children who had never experienced anything

- Youth Group Leader, Adventures Away From Home



Ensuring that young people are able to shape and contribute to changes within both the outdoor learning sector and their own individual outdoor learning experiences can often be fundamental to engagement and a meaningful journey and experience for the young people. The sector as a whole needs to achieve more buy in from young people in order to meet young people where they are already.

There is also a significant lack of data, including on the long term impacts, to help understand and advocate for the best quality of practice within outdoor learning.

Increasing access to outdoor learning should not focus on just quantity of provision, but on the quality of experiences, and ensuring that all young people, no matter their background or needs, can feel the benefits of outdoor learning.

A progressive experience, building on each individual engagement for a young person with outdoor learning, provides much more opportunity for young people to get the most out of their outdoor learning journey, building on previous knowledge and skill development, and creating a much bigger impact. Where young people currently receive outdoor learning provision, it is often a one-off event, rather than several smaller interventions leading to a significant experience such as a residential. Youth clubs can often provide this more progressive experience. Consideration should be made as to how this can be factored into access, and what meaningful access to outdoor learning looks like.

Recommendation 10: The Department for Culture, Media and Sport should commission further research into current levels of engagement with outdoor learning, gaps in provision, and outcomes for young people.

“I can overcome my fears and achieve what I want to do, when I am focused I am very capable (...) so I’ve learned something new and overcome my fears .”

- Adventures Away From Home Participant, 13, Northumberland



Conclusion

Whilst there are examples of great provision across the UK, we know that many young people are missing out on quality experiences for adventures and equitable access to outdoor learning is not the norm for our young people. Recent work by UK Youth and a number of other organisations has demonstrated just how wide this potential gap to access currently is, and highlighted the real positive benefits from opening up provision.

We know that outdoor learning can provide substantial benefits to young people, from improvements in physical and mental wellbeing, and an increased appreciation of their natural environment, to developing skills and independence. These positive impacts are something we want to see replicated and available to all young people across the UK. We believe that it is possible to make outdoor learning accessible to young people, and that this can be achieved through the power of youth work working in cross-sector partnerships.

It is clear from this report that there is a need for clear leadership and an action plan from the Government to address the need for equitable access to outdoor learning, as well as a drive to secure sustainable funding for the sector. We know that there are real benefits to be seen from engaging with outdoor learning to support young people's wellbeing, specifically in targeted approaches to delivering holistic mental health support.

We want youth workers, leaders and teachers to be empowered to engage with and deliver quality outdoor learning, and we want to see support for the facilities and infrastructure that make outdoor learning possible. We know that working together in partnerships with local organisations can help create impactful and meaningful change for young people, and that we can think in new ways about how to create an ecosystem of support for young people through outdoor learning by thinking about a systems change approach to physical literacy. All of this work needs to centre the voices of young people at its heart, and ensure that we listen and co-create with young people themselves on solutions to these challenges.

This report has brought together a number of experts in this area to help identify recommendations that policy makers could take that would deliver greater access to outdoor learning for all young people. If the recommendations were implemented, we believe that we would all see a huge range of benefits to individual young people, as well as positive changes to the system that supports outdoor learning and youth organisations. This report identifies areas where there is a real opportunity to make significant change to improve the lives of young people both in the present and for their future.

UK Youth will continue to push forward change in this space, but we also hope that this report will act as a catalyst to propel this work forward.



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