



ENGLISH OUTDOOR COUNCIL

Association of Heads of Outdoor Education Centres, British Activity Holiday Association Ltd., Christian Camping International, Institute for Outdoor Learning, National Association of Field Study Officers, National Council for Voluntary Youth Services, Outdoor Education Advisers' Panel, Outdoor Industries Association, Young Explorers' Trust.

TIME FOR CHANGE IN OUTDOOR LEARNING

Hard evidence on the value of the outdoors and a challenge to deliver fair access for all

Executive Summary

- There is now crystal clear and incontestable evidence in support of learning outside the classroom.
- Within the broad sphere of learning outside the classroom, challenging outdoor activities and environmental studies are particularly powerful learning opportunities. They contribute to a range of important societal targets across education, health, anti-social behaviour and community cohesion.
- Not all young people benefit from these opportunities.
- To redress this unfairness, there should be an entitlement to a progressive range of learning experiences outside the classroom, including at least one residential experience, for all young people.
- This view is shared by much of society, including many MPs, as shown by a very positive response to a recent EDM.
- Such an entitlement would support a number of commitments in both the Conservative and the Liberal Democrat manifestos.
- There is a clear economic case that the entitlement should be publicly funded.
- If, in view of the current economic situation, it is necessary to delay any new financial commitments, it is nevertheless possible to achieve a limited entitlement without additional net government funding.
- Most parents recognize the benefits and are willing to contribute. This is justifiable.
- But there is a need to support those young people who would not otherwise be able to afford the experience. In the longer term, the modest cost of such support would be balanced by real savings resulting from the societal benefits.
- This document lists the evidence and explains how the government can, even in the current economic climate, create fair access for all by creating a simple entitlement to a range of progressive outdoor learning opportunities. This can be achieved by explicitly stating that the premium for disadvantaged pupils may, among other things, be used to support the provision of learning outside the classroom.

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Hard evidence

There is clear and compelling evidence that

- learning outside the classroom raises educational standards,
- it makes a powerful contribution to curriculum aims,
- outdoor activity helps to address health problems and enhances wellbeing,
- it offers for many their first real contact with the natural environment,
- it builds cross-cultural understanding and can change communities,
- it helps to reduce anti-social behaviour, crime and disengagement from education,
- it helps young people to manage risk and encourages them to welcome challenge.

A taste of the evidence follows. For more information, the reference section gives a series of one click links to a wealth of comprehensive and convincing documentation.

Learning outside the classroom raises educational standards

OFSTED published a thematic report on learning outside the classroom in October 2008 (1). Among its key findings was:

"When planned and implemented well, learning outside the classroom contributed significantly to raising standards and improving pupils' personal, social and emotional development."

It recommended that schools and colleges should:

"ensure that their curriculum planning includes sufficient well structured opportunities for all learners to engage in learning outside the classroom as a key, integrated element of their experience"

and "ensure equal and full access for all learners to learning outside the classroom"

The Teaching and Learning Research Programme is a large scale research programme (2) that has concluded as one of its ten principles for effective teaching and learning that:

"Informal learning, such as learning out of school, should be recognised as at least as significant as formal learning and should therefore be valued and appropriately utilised in formal processes."

Outdoor learning makes a powerful contribution to curriculum aims

QCDA has published a set of aims for the curriculum (3). These are that it should enable all young people to become:

- successful learners who enjoy learning, make progress and achieve,
- confident individuals who are able to live safe, healthy and fulfilling lives,
- responsible citizens who make a positive contribution to society.

Outdoor learning, especially through a residential experience, contributes particularly powerfully to the second of these aims. QCDA lists the following elements as part of that aim. Outdoor learning helps young people to achieve these far more effectively than they could in a school context:

- have a sense of self-worth and personal identity,
- relate well to others and form good relationships,
- are self-aware and deal with their emotions,
- become increasingly independent, are able to take the initiative and organise themselves,
- make healthy lifestyle choices,
- are physically competent and confident,
- take managed risks and stay safe,
- are willing to try new things and make the most of opportunities,
- are open to the excitement and inspiration offered by the natural world ...

These are exactly the range of outcomes that outdoor learning delivers so well. A meta-analysis of 96 studies (4) shows that there are significant improvements in independence, confidence, self-efficacy, self-understanding, assertiveness, internal locus of control and decision making as a result of outdoor adventure programmes.

Outdoor activity helps to address health problems and enhances wellbeing

The 2009 Department of Health publication “Be Active, Be Healthy” (5) estimates the annual cost to the NHS of physical inactivity at between £1 and £1.8 billion. It recognizes the importance of the outdoors:

“Natural environments offer important settings for health-enhancing physical activity.” “Contact with nature has been shown to improve people’s physical and mental health.”

There is an increasing emphasis on wellbeing as a key indicator of societal progress (6). The New Economics Foundation emphasises five actions to enhance wellbeing – connect with others, be active, take notice of what is around you, keep learning and give to others (7). Outdoor activity is a superb way of enhancing wellbeing in this way.

DEFRA’s review of evidence (8) made the point that:

"The natural environment provides physical, mental and social wellbeing benefits. There are synergistic effects between these benefits."

A recent literature review on children in the outdoors (9) states:

"It is generally reported that being outdoors contributes to higher levels of wellbeing bringing physiological benefits such as stress reduction."

The Countryside Recreation Network (10) finds that:

"There is substantial evidence that links the natural environment with good physical health and psychological wellbeing."

It offers for many their first real contact with the natural environment

Arguably the single most important lesson for the future is an understanding and respect for our environment and an awareness of our responsibility to behave towards it in a sustainable way. There is no better way of developing such understanding and respect than first hand experience. This is particularly so for those who live in towns and cities.

Natural England's research (11) shows that today's children spend substantially less of their time in a natural environment, in comparison with the previous generation. It points out that

"Traditional outdoor activities are as popular now as they were in the past"

but argues that there is a need to make natural spaces more available for children today.

It helps to reduce disengagement, anti-social behaviour and crime

A recent DEMOS report (12) shows how serious the problems of disengagement in our schools is and considers that

"there is a good deal of research linking participation in out-of-school activities characterised by high quality adult-child relationships with better outcomes."

A New Philanthropy Capital report (13) highlights the success of outdoor activity in helping to re-engage the one in ten 16 to 18 year olds who are not in education, employment or training.

"Sport, outdoor activities and creative activities such as dance, can all be used as a 'hook' to motivate young people to participate. As many young people have had a bad experience of formal education, alternatives need to be different."

A DCSF report on attitudinal barriers to engaging young people in positive activities (14) reports the views of young people themselves:

"Sports and outdoor activities, in particular, were seen as the most fun and helpful in developing confidence."

It builds cross-cultural understanding and can change communities

In terms of community cohesion, the contribution that outdoor recreation can make to combating discrimination and promoting cross-cultural understanding has also been highlighted in a report by the Countryside Agency and the Black Environment Network (15).

A National Trust study (16) also showed the impact on communities:

'We looked at whether school children's learning about their local environment would influence the way they treat it. We found that not only was this the case, but high quality, out-of-classroom learning also influenced how children behave and the lifestyle choices they make. It shows the potential for schools trips not just to change individual lives, but the lives of whole communities.'

It helps young people to manage risk and encourages them to welcome challenge

There is a growing groundswell of media and public opinion that recognizes that risk is an inescapable aspect of life and that, instead of wrapping our children in cotton wool, we should help them to take greater responsibility for managing their own safety. The Risk and Regulation Advisory Council has published a very positive report (17) which deplores disproportionate responses to risk and regulatory creep. We endorse the Council's efforts to signpost the way to achieving a consistently balanced societal response to risk.

Within our own sector, we have published guidance to teachers (18) which encourages them to take a reasonable and proportionate approach to safety and reassures them that a degree of risk, properly managed, is positively desirable in helping young people to learn to manage their own safety. A risk-averse

approach is discouraged. Instead, readers are encouraged to balance the risks and the benefits from an activity.

Unnecessary risk aversion is an insidious influence which is damaging to enterprise and initiative. Sociologist Frank Furedi (19) considers that:

“The worship of safety represents a profoundly pessimistic attitude towards human potential.”

Outdoor education teaches young people to face real risk in a sensible way and encourages a “can do” attitude.

A powerful impact but far from equal opportunity

While all forms of learning outside the classroom are valuable, challenging outdoor activities and environmental studies have a particularly powerful impact on young people, especially when delivered through a residential experience.

Despite the current economic situation, there is still a healthy extent of outdoor provision, possibly because many school staff and parents recognize the unique contribution it makes to personal development. A total of 66% of pupils take up the opportunity of a residential experience during their time at school (20). However, in only 21% of schools do **all** the pupils attend a residential.

This disparity of opportunity is described in detail by Professor Power et al (21). Their research shows a clear link between the level of provision of outdoor education and the proportion of pupils in the school who are eligible for free school meals - the greater the level of disadvantage, the less provision. This is particularly tragic in that most disadvantaged pupils have potentially most to gain from the transformative impact that outdoor education has for many young people.

Power et al emphasise the potential inequality:

“If high quality out-of-school learning is to become an entitlement rather than an ‘add-on’ that only some can afford, it will be important to invest significant resources, develop structured support and clarify strategic direction at school, authority and national level. Unless this happens, the uneven distribution of high quality out-of-school learning both between and within schools may well exacerbate educational inequalities.”

In recent years, the potential of the outdoors has been clearly recognized in Early Years provision (22):

“Outdoor learning has equal value to indoor learning.”

“Outdoor learning has a positive impact on children’s wellbeing and development.”

In contrast however, outdoor learning has not yet been embedded into the curriculum for primary and secondary school pupils.

An entitlement – public and political support

This unfair disparity would be eliminated by declaring a simple entitlement to a progressive range of learning experiences outside the classroom, including at least one residential experience, for all young people.

There is widespread support for such an entitlement. It forms the focus of the Countryside Alliance Foundation's aspirations for outdoor education (23). Their report contains survey evidence from teachers and pupils which reveals huge enthusiasm for outdoor education.

In its 2010 follow-up report (24), the House of Commons Children, Schools and Families Select Committee noted the very strong body of evidence that has been established to show the benefits of learning outside the classroom and expressed concern that children are spending less and less time outside. It expressed disappointment in the lack of progress made in the previous five years, recommending that:

"Learning outside the classroom is important, and the Department must provide adequate funding to achieve maximum impact."

"We call on the Department to ensure that families' ability to pay is not a deterrent to schools offering or pupils participating in school trips and visits."

"There should be an individual entitlement within the National Curriculum to at least one out of school visit a term."

During the 2009-2010 parliamentary session, the following Early Day Motion was tabled:

"That this House notes the conclusion of an Ofsted report that learning outside the classroom contributes significantly to raising standards; recognises that learning through experience is a powerful educational tool; applauds the work put into the Manifesto for Learning Outside the Classroom; regrets that despite this work, its aspiration to provide all young people with a wide range of quality experiences outside the classroom, including one or more residential visits, is not yet embedded in all schools; and calls on the Government to find a way of making this a reality for all young people, including those who need financial support."

Despite the fact that the Conservative Party understandably advised its MPs not to sign (because it could have financial implications), there were nevertheless no fewer than 104 signatories, clear evidence of the breadth of support from MPs.

Support for the Conservative and Liberal Democrat manifesto commitments

We strongly support proposals for a National Citizen Service. We have actively contributed to the development of the pilot scheme and are convinced from direct experience of such provision that it will make a major contribution towards building the big society that is the government's vision. As a sector, we will work to deliver high quality, high impact adventure provision as part of this scheme.

One of the key benefits of residential adventure experience as an element of this programme is its ability to develop trust. We wholly agree that the erosion of trust in society must be tackled. Outdoor programmes excel in developing trust.

We welcome the Conservative proposals to develop a measure of wellbeing and argue that regular access to the natural environment and to outdoor activity should be part of that measure.

Volunteers are vital to the new vision of society. They make up a very large part of outdoor provision: the Sector Skills Council estimates that no less than 70% of the outdoor workforce is made up of volunteers. We welcome the Liberal Democrat proposals for the youth service and the suggestion that services are provided in partnership with the voluntary sector.

While the National Citizen Service proposals are extremely positive, it is important that this excellent initiative should not be at the expense of outdoor provision in schools. We have two reasons for saying

this. First, it is important to catch vulnerable young people in time – to facilitate interventions before their attitudes and behaviour have a chance to settle into an anti-social form. Second, some experience of challenging activity will increase young people’s receptiveness to the National Citizen Service at age 16.

We wholly support smaller government but there is a point beyond which the quality of young people’s educational experience will suffer. Some young people do currently suffer from the lack of opportunity to participate in outdoor activity and, in the light of the Liberal Democrat commitment to hard-wire fairness into our educational system, this must be redressed.

We support the Liberal Democrat proposal to slim down the National Curriculum but consider that the evidence for learning outside the classroom is so strong that the minimum curriculum entitlement proposed must include that opportunity. We note that the Scottish Liberal Democrats (25) have proposed that

“Every child will be entitled to two weeks of outdoor activity during their time at secondary school, allowing them to learn new skills and better understand their environment.”

and we commend that confidence in the value of the outdoors.

Finally, we welcome the Conservative Party review of health and safety that has been carried out by Lord Young of Graffham. We have contributed to this review and will be happy to comment further on health and safety issues that are relevant to outdoor provision. We are particularly concerned that safety measures should be balanced and proportionate and that unnecessary ratcheting up of regulation should stop; we therefore welcome the proposal for regulatory budgets.

An entitlement makes economic sense

There is a huge amount of evidence which brings home the cost of doing nothing. Backing the Future (26) demonstrates vividly that proactive investment in pre-emptive measures to tackle social problems could save £1.5 trillion spent on picking up the pieces after it is too late. For every £1 invested in targeted services designed to catch problems early, the authors estimate that society would benefit by between £7.60 and £9.20.

Of course, outdoor activity is only one of the range of interventions that can be used to contribute to solving these social problems. However, its effectiveness is clearly recognized: the Sutton Trust (27) notes that summer camps that mix learning with fun:

“have shown substantial improvements in participants’ reading scores ... which disproportionately impacts on those from lower socio-economic groups”

The report concludes that there is a cost-benefit ration of 13:1 for such camps.

Quite apart from the developmental impact of the outdoors, the sector makes a substantial contribution to rural employment and regeneration. With an estimated £430 million output (28), it is a significant employer of young adults.

In short, there is a clear economic argument that there should be a publicly funded entitlement to a progressive range of learning experiences outside the classroom, including at least one residential experience. However, it is recognized that the current economic climate is not one in which new spending commitments are likely. Therefore, we propose an alternative.

A feasible alternative

It is possible to propose a combination of steps that will make it possible to create that all-important entitlement, without significant new central government funding.

Most parents are very supportive of outdoor education and seem to have an intuitive understanding that challenge is a very positive developmental experience. As a result, they are perfectly willing to contribute to the costs of the experience, particularly the costs of a residential. We consider that, for those parents who can afford it, this is acceptable.

However, it is essential that there is a safety net for those whose parents cannot afford to contribute. Schools are able to a certain extent to support such pupils through their existing delegated funding but, if an entitlement is to be achieved for all young people, some further support to schools is desirable.

There are currently a number of different sources of central government funding. These include:

- The Extended Services Disadvantage Subsidy
- Local initiatives such as London Challenge, Black Country Challenge and Greater Manchester Challenge
- Do It 4 Real

Each of these sources of funds has been set up for a good reason and each provides valuable opportunities. However, those opportunities are in some cases limited to specific urban areas and leave many young people unsupported. For example, research by Professor Power et al (21) shows that pupils in small rural schools have fewer opportunities for learning outside the classroom than pupils in city schools.

We very much welcome the creation of a premium for disadvantaged pupils. Individual headteachers will clearly have their own priorities for using that premium. However, we argue that the government should explicitly state that the premium may, among other things, be used to support the provision of learning outside the classroom. If this were done, we would welcome it if the premium absorbed and replaced the current sources of funding.

We are confident that the investment will be more than recouped by the savings illustrated in the economic section above and would be dwarfed by the human, financial and social cost of doing nothing. Moreover, it will end the unfairness caused by unequal access and will allow an entitlement to a range of progressive outdoor learning opportunities, including at least one residential, to become a reality for all young people.

In summary, we propose that:

- There should be a formal entitlement for **all** young people to a progressive range of opportunities for learning outside the classroom, including at least one residential experience.
- In the roll-out of the proposed premium for disadvantaged pupils, it should be stated explicitly that this may be used to support the provision of learning outside the classroom, to support those young people who would not otherwise be able to afford these opportunities.

This will, for the first time, allow learning outside the classroom to be embedded on a sustainable basis into our educational system.

References

If you have a paper copy of this document, for ease of accessing the hyperlinks below, you might like to download a pdf copy from www.englishoutdoorcouncil.org/publications/change.

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