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# 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 (represented by Field Studies Council), National Council for Voluntary Youth Services, Outdoor Education Advisers' Panel, Outdoor Industries Association, Young Explorers' Trust.

## **ACTION, NOT WORDS**

### **A briefing paper summarising evidence on the value of outdoor learning and the action needed to make it a reality for all young people**

#### **Executive summary**

Since our last briefing paper in 2007, there has been a flood of further evidence on the impact of outdoor activities on young people. There is now an overwhelming case for regular participation in adventurous and environmental education as a core part of the curriculum.

There is crystal clear evidence

- that learning outside the classroom raises educational standards,
- that outdoor activity helps to address health and obesity problems,
- that it develops resilience and contributes to physical, psychological and social well being,
- that it helps to reduce disengagement from education, anti-social behaviour and crime,
- that it builds cross-cultural understanding and can change communities,
- that it helps young people to manage risk and encourages them to welcome challenge,
- that investment in pre-emptive measures is far more cost-effective than picking up the pieces afterwards.

Over the last few years, there has been a growing intolerance of the cotton wool culture and a significant shift in the public attitude to adventure. It is now clearly recognized as intrinsically valuable and there is recognition of the need to balance risks and benefits. Experience of adventure is seen as an important opportunity for young people to learn to manage their own safety.

However, despite enthusiastic uptake by many schools, there is huge inequality of access to outdoor learning opportunities. Despite DCSF encouragement, there are still too many schools that do not treat learning outside the classroom as an integral part of the curriculum and too many young people whose parents cannot afford to support them.

Politicians in Scotland have had the courage to recognize the contribution that outdoor education makes and to include a commitment to an entitlement in their policies.

In England, there have been plenty of warm words. It's now time for action. Our children deserve a simple entitlement to a progressive range of outdoor learning opportunities, including at least one residential experience during their school career.

This paper spells out the evidence that would support a manifesto commitment to that effect and argues that it is affordable. We must find a way of making this powerful learning experience a reality for **all** young people, including those who need financial support.

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Chair

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## **Evidence on the educational impact**

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 by monitoring participation in activities by different groups of learners and removing any barriers."

Note the emphasis on the integration of learning outside the classroom into the curriculum. It must be seen as part of the core curriculum, not an optional extra. The National Centre for Excellence in the Teaching of Mathematics endorses this in a series of modules to support teaching mathematics outside the classroom (2):

"Learning mathematics outside the classroom is not enrichment, it is at the core of empowering an individual's understanding of the subject."

Increasingly, the national curriculum recognizes its value. QCA's big picture of the curriculum (3) identifies learning outside the classroom as an integral component of the way that learning is organised. In its aims for the curriculum (4), QCA states:

"The school curriculum should promote pupils' self-esteem and emotional wellbeing and help them to form and maintain worthwhile and satisfying relationships ..." and

"It should also develop their physical skills and encourage them to recognize the importance of pursuing a healthy lifestyle and keeping themselves and others safe."

There is no better way to promote self-esteem than to allow pupils to succeed in challenging activities. Outdoor activities also provide a particularly effective way of helping pupils to learn to manage their own safety when facing risks. This theme is developed further below.

A large scale research programme (5) that has been continuing for a number of years (the Teaching and Learning Research Programme) 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."

## **Evidence on the impact on health and well being**

In its report on the impact of physical activity on health (6), the Department of Health stated:

"The extensive evidence reviewed in this report reinforces the view that physical inactivity is undoubtedly one of the major contributory factors to the current epidemics of chronic disease. The encouragement of active lifestyles must be an important element of any future public health strategy."

The Outdoor Health Forum (7) has published a wealth of evidence to support the assertion that:

"The natural environment can play a huge role in improving the health of the British people. The Chair of the Outdoor Health Forum once called it "the Nation's greatest outpatient department" ."

Moreover, the benefits extend beyond countering obesity and improving physical health. The Countryside Recreation Network (8) finds that:

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

DEFRA (9) 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 (10) states:

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

## **Evidence on the impact on disengagement from education, crime and anti-social behaviour**

A recent DEMOS report (11) 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."

CCPR, in its report on how sport contributes to Public Service Agreement targets (12), discusses the contribution of sport to crime targets, including reducing recidivism and tackling drug and alcohol abuse. It concludes that

" ... there is evidence to suggest that properly targeted programmes, based on a clear understanding of how sport can facilitate processes of skills development and pro-social development, can be effective in reducing re-offending" but that "traditional, competitive sport may not be a suitable 'vehicle'."

Outdoor adventurous activities can help. It has been shown that positive activities do make a difference. Evaluation of the Positive Activities for Young People initiative (PAYP) (13) shows that:

"PAYP was viewed by participating agencies as being successful, delivering a targeted programme to a hard to engage client group, and in doing so achieved a range of positive outcomes for participating young people e.g. contributing to reductions in criminal and anti-social behaviour, supporting young people back into education, and offering opportunities for personal development."

### **Evidence on the impact on the community**

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 (14).

A National Trust study (15) 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.'

### **Cotton wool and the alternatives**

Society's attitudes to risk and adventure have become clear over recent years. There is widespread intolerance of unnecessary or disproportionately restrictive health and safety measures. HSE themselves are very clear that there should be a sensible approach to risk management (16) which recognises the need to seek a balance between the unachievable aim of absolute safety and addressing unacceptably poor risk management. In fact, it publishes an amusing series of cartoons entitled "Myth of the month" (17).

This view is shared by government. Ed Balls, in the introduction to the Staying Safe Action Plan (18), says:

"This does not mean that we should wrap our children up in cotton wool - we need to strike the right balance between protecting children and young people and allowing them the freedom to develop and enjoy their childhoods." "... it is important for us, as a society, to strike a balance between protecting children and allowing them to explore and learn about risks for themselves."

Evidence to support a less risk averse society is found in two excellent recent publications, Tim Gill's "No Fear: Growing up in a risk averse society" (19) and Frank Furedi and Jennie Bristow's "Licensed to Hug" (20). The need to balance risks and benefits and the dangers of not doing so are well illustrated in Marcus Bailie's "... and by comparison" (21). While there is still much protectionist behaviour that needs to be challenged, there is no doubt that the tide of public opinion has turned in favour of a balanced approach to risks and benefits.

## Summaries of evidence

Natural England commissioned a comprehensive study (22) published in 2006 which summarised the benefits of engagement with wild adventure space under the headings:

- physical health
- mental health
- development of positive self-image
- social development
- educational development
- community development

Among the report's numerous practical suggestions for inclusive use of the outdoors was a priority recommendation to "Campaign for recognition of the concept that all young people have a right and need to experience adventure outdoors."

Finally, a literature survey was published in 2004 (23) which reported on all published research on outdoor learning in the previous ten years. Findings included:

"Effective fieldwork, and residential experience in particular, can lead to individual growth and improvements in social skills. More importantly, there can be reinforcement between the affective and the cognitive, with each influencing the other and providing a bridge to higher order learning."

"There is substantial research evidence to suggest that outdoor adventure programmes can impact positively on young people's attitudes, beliefs and self-perceptions ... inter-personal and social skills". It also found "examples of outdoor adventure programmes yielding benefits in terms of the development of general and specific academic skills, as well as improved engagement and achievement, the promotion of positive behaviour and reduced rates of re-offending, and improved physical self-image and fitness".

## Political support

All three main political parties are in principle supportive of outdoor adventure and we applaud steps that each has taken to promote its greater use. "Aiming high for young people: a ten year strategy for positive activities", published by the Treasury and DCSF in 2007 (24), emphasises the importance of resilience and of social and emotional skills. It identifies numerous benefits, both on a personal level and in terms of community cohesion. It recognizes the powerful benefit of residential programmes and the government has continued for the time being to fund through Exchequer funding a programme of residential courses which was previously funded by the Lottery: "Do It 4 Real". That programme aims to bring together young people from different backgrounds and, crucially, offers a subsidy for young people from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. However, the programme ends in 2010.

Conservative policy expressed in the Childhood Review (25), recognizes a number of issues ranging from declining trust to bullying and the need to reclaim public space. It clearly recognizes the benefits of risk, challenge and adventure. In fact the Conservative Party has proposed a voluntary National Citizen Service programme for 16 year olds, a programme which is being piloted in 2009.

Scottish Liberal Democrats (26) have made a commitment 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.”

### **Learning Outside the Classroom Manifesto**

In 2005, the House of Commons Education and Skills Committee (27) recommended that:

"The Department should issue a 'Manifesto for Outdoor Learning', giving **all** students a right to outdoor learning."

This happened, but with substantially less funding than the Committee recommended. It also stopped short of conferring a right, instead, trying to achieve its aims by persuasion and encouragement. DCSF launched the Learning Outside the Classroom Manifesto and responsibility for this has now been transferred to the Council for Learning Outside the Classroom (28). A significant amount of support material has been produced through this initiative, including a Quality Badge which accredits providers of high quality learning outside the classroom.

However, the impact in terms of increased participation has been less than had been hoped. In our evidence to the Education and Skills Committee (29) we pointed out that OFSTED had stated in 2004

"Outdoor education gives depth to the curriculum and makes an important contribution to students' physical, personal and social education. However, not all students in schools benefit from such experiences."

and proposed as one of its six points for action that the government should

"Ensure the benefits of outdoor education can be experienced by **all** students".

We are still nowhere near achieving this aspiration. Despite an even stronger OFSTED recommendation in 2008 and despite the wealth of evidence cited above, there are still many students who do not benefit from the powerful impact of outdoor experience. Research reported in 2005 (30) shows that, although 66% of pupils overall take up the opportunity, in only 21% of schools do **all** pupils take up a residential opportunity during their time at school, with cost being seen as the primary reason for non-participation.

### **Action needed**

Persuasion only works to an extent. This is particularly the case if local authority and school staff have to decide between provision which is statutorily required and provision which is not: statutory requirements will inevitably win. In our view, the only solution is for there to be an entitlement to a progressive range of learning outside the classroom opportunities, including at least one residential experience.

Although, at a time of recession, investment in the future is more important than ever, the economic climate clearly does not lend itself to new financial commitments. However, there is already substantial funding available to local authorities and schools through the range of funding streams that schools are able to draw on. Moreover, the principle of parental contribution (where legally allowed and where parents can afford it) for some aspects of learning outside the classroom is happily accepted by the majority of parents.

There is therefore a strong argument that there is no need for significant new central funding. Instead, it can be argued that there are funds available and that it is largely a question of priorities for schools. An entitlement would simply require some schools to balance their priorities in different ways.

However, this would still lead to inequity. Unless there is some support available for schools to provide equally for all pupils, those who will suffer will inevitably be the most disadvantaged. The opportunity gap between the different strata in our society will remain. Therefore, there is a real need for support for young people whose parents cannot afford to contribute to learning outside the classroom experiences.

Those young people clearly overlap with the most vulnerable in society, those who are at risk of social exclusion. A persuasive document, "The Cost of Exclusion", published by The Prince's Trust (31), considered the costs of social exclusion to society. It estimated the annual cost of youth unemployment to be £4.6 billion, the cost of youth crime to be in excess of £1 billion and the cost of educational underachievement to be between £2 and 5 billion.

We should weigh the cost of proactive steps to prevent young people from drifting into these situations against the cost of dealing with the consequences in retrospect. Challenging outdoor activities are a proven medium for helping young people engage with learning, often for the first time. Developing their self-perception is key to those young people's success and the wealth of evidence detailed above shows that the outdoors is a powerful medium for achieving this. A relatively modest sum spent on ensuring that all young people have the opportunity to engage in outdoor learning will have a huge effect.

In summary, we propose that:

- There should be a formal entitlement for **all** young people to a progressive range of learning outside the classroom opportunities, including at least one residential experience.
- There should be a ring-fenced source of funding to support those young people who would not otherwise be able to afford this.

Only in this way will learning outside the classroom be embedded on a sustainable basis into our educational system.

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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/action.pdf](http://www.englishoutdoorcouncil.org/action.pdf).

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