

‘A SPIRIT OF ADVENTURE IN TODAY’S SOCIETY’

A challenge to politicians published by the English Outdoor Council

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Introduction

In his foreword to a report published in October 2006 (1), Rick Haythornthwaite, the Chair of the Better Regulation Commission, stated that the most important of the Commission's calls to our leaders involved:

“emphasising the importance of resilience, self-reliance, freedom, innovation and a spirit of adventure in today's society”.

These qualities are vital for the health of society. Adventurous experiences for young people are a key way of developing such qualities and this paper will show that they also make a direct contribution towards a number of societal aims.

In recent years, there have been a number of very positive steps forward in helping to make sure that those experiences are available to all young people. But there are also barriers to further progress and much work still to do.

- Despite the recent emphasis on learning outside the classroom, our young people still do not have an entitlement to one of the most powerful forms of personal development that exists.
- Despite the evidence for the effectiveness of preventative measures, we are not spending enough money on pre-emptive work which can prevent young people from falling into the cycle of low achievement and anti-social behaviour. Instead we are spending far more than we need to on picking up the bits after it is too late.
- Despite the fact that society has made excellent progress in coming to a more realistic balance between risks and benefits, experience is still being denied because unnecessarily defensive decisions are still being made.

This paper summarises the progress made over the last ten years, highlights those areas where progress has not been made and presents the social and economic arguments for finishing the job that has been started.

Executive summary

The paper starts with a review of a number of positive recent initiatives which involved residential adventurous activity experiences, quoting from the evaluations of each. Particular points of interest that emerged are:

- Uproject was effective at preventing young people from becoming part of the NEET population (Not in Education, Employment or Training).
- Positive Activities for Young People achieved a range of positive outcomes for participating young people, including reducing criminal and anti-social behaviour and supporting young people back into education.
- Do It 4 Real succeeded in all its aims, which included improving life skills and social skills, increasing awareness of own learning skills and supporting

the development of community and social values.

- London Challenge has reported very positive overall outcomes, with inner London school results continuing to improve faster than anywhere else.

Further recent developments described include a very positive report from the House of Commons Education and Skills Committee, publication of a Manifesto for Learning Outside the Classroom and good progress made by the All Party Parliamentary Group on Adventure and Recreation in Society in promoting a sensible and balanced approach to risk. It is clear that it is now widely accepted that out of classroom and residential experience is a powerful learning medium which should be available to all young people.

However, despite all these initiatives, there is still a huge poverty gap, with many young people unable to afford the significant boost to self-confidence that an adventurous experience so often gives. The paper spells out the human costs, social costs and financial costs to society of this failure. It details evidence that shows there are significant economic benefits in investing in proactive attempts to develop young people in contrast to a reactive response to dealing with problems after it is too late.

A further particular problem described is that the intentions of central government, expressed in the Manifesto, have become lost in translation. Even though adventurous out of classroom activities are a powerful way of achieving Every Child Matters outcomes, there are so many conflicting priorities on schools and Children's Services Departments that anything that is non-statutory is at risk of becoming squeezed out.

This paper asserts that the benefits to young people and to society are too important to be left to chance in this way. It therefore concludes that:

- There should be an entitlement for all young people to experience learning outside the classroom, including at least one residential experience.
- There should be a ringfenced source of funding to support those young people who would not otherwise be able to afford the experience.
- There should be a recognition that early intervention to tackle serious social issues makes economic sense.
- There should be renewed emphasis on ensuring that a sensible approach to risk management becomes widely recognised and applied.

Progress made in recent years

In 1997, the government responded positively to suggestions that there was a good case for Lottery funding of residential experience and adventurous activities. Subsequent Lottery funded projects included Summer Activities for 16 Year Olds, Uproject and Positive Activities for Young People, all of which were targeted at young people at risk, and Do It 4 Real, which was more broadly targeted.

Summer Activities for 16 Year Olds started as a DfES funded pilot for two years and was Lottery funded for the next three years to the extent of £44.85 million. It was latterly branded as Uproject. At least 64,940 young people had benefited at the time of publication of the evaluation summary (2). It aimed to prevent school leavers from becoming part of the NEET population (Not in Education, Employment or Training).

The programme was evaluated as having been effective in doing that, although not all participants were from that target group. A more detailed evaluation report (3) indicated that young people reported higher subsequent levels of participation in further education, training or jobs with training, social gains, such as more responsible attitudes and increased citizenship skills, and increased confidence, team-working, communication and leadership skills.

Positive Activities for Young People (PAYP) was a three-year programme for young people aged 8-19, at risk of social exclusion or of being involved in community crime. It has provided diversionary and developmental activities during school holidays for over 290,000 young people at a cost of £124.5 million, jointly funded by DfES, HO and the Lottery.

The evaluation (4) stated that it was successful in delivering a targeted programme to a hard to reach client group and in doing so achieved a range of positive outcomes for participating young people, including reducing criminal and anti-social behaviour and supporting young people back into education.

Do It 4 Real aimed to provide structured residential experiences during the school holidays for 11 to 17 year olds. A total of 22,419 young people benefited in 2005 and 2006, most at subsidised rates, at a cost of £11.5 million from Lottery funds. A further £5.5 million has been allocated in 2007. The programme was targeted at young people from a variety of backgrounds with the intention of increasing connections among young people from different social groups and providing a memorable experience which assists young people to learn through active adventure, improves life skills and social skills, increases awareness of own learning skills and supports the development of community and social values.

The evaluation (5) reports success in all these aims but concludes that “the withdrawal of subsidy may lead to a significant fall in demand moving forward.”

As well as revenue funding to support residential activities, there has also been Lottery funding available to support capital projects in outdoor centres under the New Opportunities for PE and Sport programme.

There has also been some Exchequer funding devoted to learning outside the classroom. The London Challenge (6) is a five year partnership between government, schools and boroughs to raise educational standards in London’s secondary school system. The London Student Pledge offers the chance to participate in a wide range of out of classroom activities, including a residential experience.

Evaluation of the experience of 428 London students who attended residential field courses in 2004 (7) showed that teachers and pupils reported that levels of motivation and participation were very high, particularly where activities were adventure-based rather than purely academic. Many pupils surpassed their own expectations of achievement during the courses, and both pupils and teachers felt that the general levels of trust in others and the self-confidence shown by the pupils on the courses were higher than in school. Teachers were very impressed overall by the development of teamwork skills amongst the pupils and the vast majority of pupils maintained or built positive relationships with each other, with teachers and with centre staff.

There has been no attempt to measure the specific impact of the residential experience on the overall impact of London Challenge but very positive overall outcomes are reported (6) with inner London results continuing to improve faster than anywhere else. In May 2007, Alan Johnson said in a speech that he will soon be announcing two further schemes which will emulate the London Challenge programme in other parts of the country (8).

In 2004, the House of Commons Education and Skills Committee carried out an inquiry into Education Outside the Classroom. Its report (9) was extremely positive. The Committee was convinced “that outdoor learning can benefit pupils of all ages ... enriches the curriculum and can improve classroom attainment”. However it was clear to the Committee “that outdoor education is a sector suffering from considerable unexploited potential”.

In its evidence to the inquiry, DfES proposed a manifesto for outdoor learning. This was endorsed by the Committee (with the proviso that it “must be more than warm words”). It was developed over the subsequent two years and was launched in 2006 as the Learning Outside the Classroom Manifesto (10). After a slow start, it seems that the Manifesto will produce more than warm words: DfES has commissioned a comprehensive PR programme and has gone out to tender for an “Out and About” package of comprehensive guidance to schools.

There have also been very positive developments in the broader arena of society’s attitudes to risk and adventure. The English Outdoor Council’s Campaign for Adventure has catalysed a number of helpful developments. One was Julian Brazier’s Private Member’s Bill on Volunteering. While the Bill failed to reach the statute book, it was nevertheless very successful in raising the profile of the negative influences on participation that were caused by fear of litigation. It also had an undoubted influence on the Compensation Act 2006 (see below).

At the time, there was a very real danger that Britain would develop a “compensation culture”. Thankfully, there has been enough common sense to prevent this. The Better Regulation Task Force publication Better Routes to Redress (11) made it clear in 2004 that claims were in fact going down. Actions following that report included the formation of a Ministerial Steering Group to take forward its recommendations and those actions have been effective in preventing a compensation culture from taking hold.

A subsequent publication from what by then had become the Better Regulation Commission was Risk, Responsibility and Regulation (1), published in 2006. As well as being the source of the opening quotation, this contained a number of sound recommendations concerning our approach to risk, most of which were accepted by the government. In the same year, the Health and Safety Executive published a set of principles of sensible risk management (12), which gave a clear message that creating a totally risk free society should not be the aim but that it is desirable to balance risks and benefits.

In 2004, an All Party Group on Adventure and Recreation in Society was formed. This has been very successful in raising the profile of risk and adventure and has made a significant contribution to achieving the balance that is now received wisdom. It had undoubted influence on the drafting of the Compensation Act 2006 and in particular the inclusion of a helpful clause on the deterrent effect of potential liability which gives a safeguard against the danger of inhibiting future “desirable activity” from taking place.

As a final illustration of steps forward in recent years, a comprehensive review of research carried out by the National Foundation for Educational Research (13) showed that “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”.

There has clearly been a great deal of positive support in recent years for adventure and for outdoor education and clear evidence that it works. However, there are still significant residual barriers and unmet needs.

A poverty gap

Demand from schools whose staff understand the benefits is buoyant, primarily funded by parental contribution. There is also a vibrant summer camp market operating for those who can afford it. However, lack of funding to enable those who cannot afford to participate in adventurous activities is a huge problem. Specifically targeted Lottery programmes come to an end this year. Local Authorities and Children’s Trusts have many other priorities. Central government is unwilling to ringfence money for a specific purpose in the context of delegated funding to schools and yet schools clearly have many conflicting priorities.

The consequence is that young people do not have an unambiguous entitlement to participate in the hugely positive out of classroom learning experiences that the Manifesto argues are so important. A disconcerting number of young people cannot afford such experiences without external funding. A report published in 2004 (14) indicates that, on average, only 70% of young people are given the opportunity to participate in a residential experience during their time at school. Of these, around two thirds of children actually do so, cost being seen as the primary reason for non-participation.

No fewer than 3.6 million children live in poverty according to a 2004 report (15). This equates to 28% of the total population of young people, interestingly close to the non-participation figures quoted above. This is a problem that must be dealt with if all young people are to have an equal opportunity to benefit from the powerful impact of outdoor learning. The most disadvantaged 10% in society are well catered for with a wide range of funds available. Parents of the least disadvantaged can afford to pay. However, that leaves a huge poverty gap, in which many parents cannot afford to pay for their children and yet funding is not currently available.

If nothing is done to cater for the young people who fall into that gap, they and society as a whole are both missing a huge opportunity. Opportunity costs fall into a number of areas, described below, in each of which outdoor education has been shown to make a significant contribution.

Human Costs

While any serious or fatal accident is of course a personal tragedy, the number of such accidents on school trips is tiny - an average of one death per year during adventure activities on school visits (16). Contrast this with the 700 school age young people who die every year in road traffic accidents, 220 in accidents in the home, 90 drownings and, saddest of all, 110 young suicides. Consider moreover the future avoidable deaths from obesity and a couch potato lifestyle: while the number cannot be predicted accurately, it is nevertheless anticipated that it will be substantial.

Participation in positive activities can make a huge difference to the risk of succumbing to one of these causes. There is an obvious health and fitness benefit in being active. Experience of being in adventurous situations helps to develop risk awareness. Furthermore, the growth of self-esteem, which is a proven outcome of adventurous activities, has been clearly shown to be an element in reducing suicides.

Social costs

A similar argument applies to a number of the most intractable problems facing our society today. Low self-esteem is a significant contributor to anti-social behaviour, crime, emotional and mental health problems, alcohol and drug abuse. Evaluations quoted above show clearly that adventurous activities, particularly in a residential context, make a huge contribution towards increasing self-confidence, with consequent impact on those problem areas. There is also ample evidence of successful targeting of specific problems.

Community cohesion is another area where purposeful activities can and do make a significant contribution. Reducing knife and gun crime, tackling the gang culture and cross-cultural assimilation are all areas in which the lessons of living and working together in a residential environment can have real spin-off back in the community.

Personal responsibility, can do attitude and entrepreneurship

Risk and challenge are an integral part of the business world and it is essential that up and coming young entrepreneurs develop the ability to manage uncertainty and to weigh up risks and benefits. Sir Digby Jones, the government's skills envoy, has launched a scathing attack on society's growing aversion to risk and enterprise (17). Learning to handle risk and uncertainty through tackling adventurous activities clearly helps to prevent the risk aversion which so easily stifles creativity and enterprise.

There is also a growing concern that young people should be able and willing to exercise personal responsibility and feel empowered to shape their own life. Having the confidence to take initiatives and to become involved, for example, by playing a role in active citizenship, is demonstrably enhanced by the personal growth and development arising out of a structured programme of adventurous activities. Self-confidence and self-image are critical in helping young people to take responsibility for themselves.

Financial costs

Dealing with the effects of social exclusion is incredibly costly. A recent report by the Prince's Trust based on research carried out by London School of Economics (18) 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.

A research project carried out in 2002 (19) showed that the lifetime cost per capita of being not in education, employment or training at age 16-18 was no less than £97,000.

It has already been shown (3 and 4) that purposeful residential activities have a direct positive impact in reducing the NEET population. Not enough research has been done to quantify the societal impact of these activities (although the English Outdoor Council is actively planning to facilitate such research).

However, it is our considered opinion that there are significant economic benefits in early intervention as a preventative measure in contrast with the costs of picking up the pieces after it is too late.

The DfES fully recognises this. Their publication "Education and Skills: The Economic Benefit" (20) states that it is "crucial that educational policies are viewed from an economic perspective" and that "there are also significant wider benefits, for example with regard to health and crime".

Benefits clearly contribute to targets of departments other than DfES and yet there could and should be far more effective cross-departmental co-operation in ensuring that there is consistent delivery to all young people.

Lost in translation

It is most unsatisfactory that central government should set out aspirations (as they have done in the Learning Outside the Classroom Manifesto) only to find that pressures at local level mean that the aspirations are simply not delivered. At local authority level, the pace of change and the many priorities facing Children's Services Departments mean that outdoor education provision can easily be squeezed out. Despite the Manifesto, local authority residential centres are still closing or are under threat, despite the fact that they have traditionally offered an excellent way of providing opportunities at reasonable cost for those young people who would not otherwise be able to afford the experience.

This is astonishing in the context that adventurous out of classroom activities are a powerful way of delivering Every Child Matters outcomes. At school level also, there are also so many conflicting priorities that it is all too easy for the school to give its pupils fewer out of classroom learning opportunities than the Manifesto intends or to pay lip service to out of classroom learning by providing short, local opportunities without balancing the costs and benefits of a more ambitious programme.

Delegated budgets and local decision making are in general positive and helpful. It is also good that DfES should seek to minimise the amount of top down direction that it imposes. However, if this means that valuable educational opportunities that DfES has agreed should be available to all pupils are not available, something needs to be done.

It is entirely understandable that Ministers should have resisted granting all pupils an entitlement to the experiences described in the Manifesto. However, it is our view that this is abdicating responsibility for making sure it happens and is short sighted in relation to the significant benefits that are described above.

A balanced approach to risks and benefits

The battle to persuade the general public that school trips are statistically very safe has effectively been won. Media comment is now generally well balanced and reporting of the small number of incidents that do occur takes note of the benefits that accrue to young people as a result of the experience.

However, much more needs to be done to maintain the momentum towards achieving a sensible balance between risks and benefits in society generally. The eminently sensible high level policy of HSE must be cascaded down to those who implement health and safety policy at local level. The Better Regulation Commission (1) suggests that "Fear of bringing the Government or a council into disrepute for inappropriate regulation must become at least as powerful as the fear of possibly letting something through that increases risk".

To restate the quotation that opened this paper, in the foreword to the same document, the Chairman says that their most important recommendation is a call "for our leaders to redefine our approach to risk management in a number of

ways”, including “emphasising the importance of resilience, self-reliance, freedom, innovation and a spirit of adventure in today’s society”.

This is where the two strands on which the English Outdoor Council has been working come together. Giving pupils an entitlement to learning outside the classroom and the financial support that some need will go a long way towards developing that spirit of adventure and to re-establishing the other vital characteristics that are needed to maintain a healthy society.

Summary of the argument and implications

1. DfES considers that all young people should have a wide range of experiences outside the classroom, including one or more residential visits.
2. There is evidence that adventurous activities are a particularly powerful opportunity for learning outside the classroom.
3. There is evidence that such experience makes a contribution to important social objectives.
4. Economically, it makes far more sense to make preventative interventions than to deal with unprevented consequences.
5. A large minority of young people cannot afford the experiences that are widely held to be so beneficial.
6. There is a poverty gap and there are huge potential costs in human, social and economic terms if this is not tackled.
7. Despite the rhetoric, pressures on local authorities and schools are such that the government’s intentions are not being implemented.
8. There should either be a clearly stated entitlement or ringfenced funding which would resolve the dilemma for schools and local authorities.
9. The government should implement with considerably more urgency the actions to which it is committed in response to the Better Regulation Commission.

Our challenge to the government

In its 2005 election manifesto, the Labour Party stated “Education is still our number one priority” and “In our third term, we will build new ladders of social mobility and advancement”. We challenge the government to deliver to all pupils an entitlement to the opportunities described in the Learning Outside the Classroom Manifesto and the funding to achieve their stated aspirations for those who need it most.

Our challenge to opposition parties

In their 2007 manifesto (21), the Scottish Liberal Democrats have had the courage to make the 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.”

We ask the Westminster opposition parties to consider making a commitment which is at least as strong.

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