

Written evidence submitted by the Institute for Outdoor Learning

The Impact of COVID-19 on education and children's services
Submission of Evidence
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Organisation : Institute for Outdoor Learning

Formed in 2001 by bringing together a wide range of outdoor learning member organisations, the Institute for Outdoor Learning is the professional body for organisations and individuals who use the outdoors to make a difference for others. We are driven by a vision of Outdoor Learning as a highly valued form of development, education and employment in UK society.

The Institute conducted a survey in late June/early July 2020 with organisations providing outdoor learning across the UK. The survey was undertaken with the support of Association of Heads of Outdoor Education Centres, British Activity Providers Association and Outdoor Council. 322 provider organisations responded. This evidence draws on responses to the survey.

Evidence

Children & young peoples' mental health

Outdoor learning activities are often a key element in children & young people developing self-awareness and self-confidence, together with other skills enabling them to maintain their mental health. Covid-19 has seen a significant reduction in children and young people being introduced to outdoor and adventurous sports and activities. This formal introduction, often through residential school visits, is not replaced by most schools' own activities.

Importantly, such introductions also lead to children and young people developing their interest in healthy outdoor sports and maintaining and developing that beyond their formal education ¹. Without this early adoption of outdoor sports children and young people are less likely to develop such interests with associated negative health and wellbeing implications.

The role of the nature in mental health and wellbeing is well document. The Institute has recently worked with British Society for Lifestyle Medicine to provide guidance on how this might be achieved ².

Financial impact on providers (inc. early years)

Covid-19 has had a very severe impact on providers of outdoor learning services across the UK. The survey responses show that outdoor residential providers are particularly hard hit. 30% of providers are likely to close or permanently reduce capacity if residential school visits do not resume before January 2021. This figure rises to 48% if those visits do not resume until after Easter 2021. This impact on residential provision

is most concerning given the proven combination of residential and the outdoors identified in 2015³.

To try and maintain some capacity for 2021 providers are indicating that they are likely to have to make redundancies which will represent at least 25% of the c.15,000 outdoor learning professional workforce. This obviously represents a potentially very impactful loss of talent in the sector and serious wider economic implications for the rural communities that many outdoor learning centres are based in.

If a reasonable level of capacity to deliver the benefits of outdoor learning, especially on a residential basis is to be retained across the UK, some recognition of increased cost in a Covid-19 compliant environment will be required. The survey responses indicated that a cost per head increase could be between 10-25% and a targeted subsidy would enable a sustainable model to be planned for.

Effect on apprenticeships and training programmes

A combination of a lack of work with clients & beneficiaries and the need to reduce costs to protect some capacity for 2021 means that the majority of apprenticeships and trainee programmes planned for 2020/21 are being cancelled. This will be at least 950 lost places for those who undertook the survey and likely to be at least twice that amount allowing for the wider sector.

As well as developing talent for the outdoor learning sector, outdoor learning providers provide an alternative route to conventional FE & HE experiences for young people. Many provide a personal development experience that sees apprentices and trainees move on into other sectors of the UK economy as significantly more employable individuals having spent their first 2-3 years employment in outdoor learning.

Long term impact on most vulnerable

The use of outdoor learning activities to engage and benefit the most vulnerable in our society was an established approach prior to Covid-19, only really challenged by funding and resource availability. Where local authorities, such as Somerset CC, have identified need and control their own outdoor learning resources or where SEND schools have access to their own resources, this has continued.

Disadvantage has been magnified where vulnerable populations of young people have relied on a traded service provision, especially where that is supplied on a residential basis. Children and Young People reliant on schools or community groups to give them access to Outdoor Learning opportunities and benefits have experienced less access to the natural environment.

Future resilience

The outdoor learning community recognises that it plays an important role within and outside school for children and young people. The Covid-19 crisis has revealed the need for improvements in individual organisation resilience and the need for systemic change in approaches across the wider education sector as follows :

1. A commitment to a consistent and minimum standard on insurance for school visits, committed to by Department for Education, insurers and outdoor learning providers.
2. An extension of approaches to managing infections in schools that includes other controlled settings such as outdoor education centres and their grounds. Applying the principles of bubbles in other controlled settings such as this makes planning and continuing provision more predictable.
3. Improved join-up and consistency in provision of guidance between Department for Education, DCMS and leading outdoor and youth bodies will also enable better planning for mitigation of impact.
4. The Institute is committed to maintaining provision of High Quality Outdoor Learning ⁴ across the UK and its members, many of which operate across the UK, would value more consistency in advice across home nations relating to access and health regulations in the event of another pandemic.

Planning for the future

The Institute is expecting to experience a very uncertain 12 months and is working to pull together the outdoor learning sector. We expect this to result in a new consolidated body, currently known as UK Outdoors, with the aim of enabling more planned and purposeful engagement with the outdoors and associated individual, group and societal benefits.

References

1. Getting Active Outdoors: A study of Demography, Motivation, Participation and Provision of Outdoor Sport and Recreation in England. Sport England 2015
2. Outdoor Mental Health Interventions : Statement of Good Practice. Institute for Outdoor Learning 2019
3. Evaluation of Learning Away : Final Report. Paul Hamlyn Foundation 2015
4. High Quality Outdoor Learning. Outdoor Council 2015

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