



Making access for all a reality

Access. Inclusion. Diversity. Equity. Big concepts and difficult things. It is easy to reel them off on a priority list, but this is a short piece on what they are starting to mean in practice within YHA.

To say that we are focusing on these things does not mean that we think that the charity has done nothing before on inclusion. Indeed, YHA has a proud history in working on access and 'all' is the starting point in our objects.

But we know that we need to do more. And that inclusion, access and equity are not just destinations - they are ongoing and living principles that should inform all decisions that we make.

This list is not finite - rather it is a snapshot of some of things that we are practically doing (because frankly - talk is cheap while effecting change is difficult).

Putting our money where our words are

In February, the YHA Board signed off a strategy and budget that had access as its core priority. Clearly coronavirus and the resulting multi-million-pound loss the organisation is facing have ripped through the budget. But the strategy and priorities remain, and we are reviewing how to take these forward in our new reality.

This priority of access and equity has been brought into even sharper relief over recent months with the continuing evidence of systemic racism in England and Wales and across the world; with clear evidence of how the pandemic has had significant impact on those with limited social, natural and financial capital and with ongoing evidence that those with disabilities and mental health challenges are often excluded from societal resource.

Despite the financial challenges, we are continuing with a number of our plans including an Assistant Director with a focus on user experience and, while now postponed until 2021, match funding support for our Sport England programme to bring in 12 Outdoor Activity Apprentices (with a commitment that at least six will be BAME, six will be women and 75% will come from households without graduates).

We have also implemented the national living wage for under 26s and structured benchmarking for all pay - a recognition that tackling structural inequalities is more than the programmes that we run. And every decision we are taking with staffing in these challenging times sticks to our charity values.

Starting with leadership

The Board and Executive have started a programme of training to look at power and privilege and are challenging our own knowledge, experiences and attitudes – and understanding how these things affect decision making.

Recognising the importance of user voice, the Board have prioritised work on Youth Engagement with a strategy in place to shape our 2020 work; immediate steps include ensuring children and young people are better informing all of our work, and the development of a youth advisory board over the year ahead – starting with a virtual advisory group over the summer. Advisory work is important, but governance is power, and the Board has committed to at least one under 26 Trustee in 2020.

More widely, the Board is looking at how we increase both the visibility and value of lived experience both on the Board and YHA leadership team. This means that – alongside the professional qualifications and careers that we have - we actively demonstrate how we value the insight and skills that other experiences bring, for example being a parent, coming from care, being visibly minority ethnic (VME), the estate we grew up on etc. And as part of our recruitment strategy for new Board Trustees, we will be proactively placing adverts and calls out into new networks to encourage broader applications.

Knowing our numbers

We have some data on who works for us, who stays with us and who our members are, but we know we need to be better at understanding this.

We have the results back from external analysis of both our members and the schools that we work with and will be using this to form both baselines for monitoring change but also to shape work on acquisition and depth of relationships.

We are looking at how we set up models to see how our work force can best reflect the communities we serve, considering data at both England and Wales national levels and at local community level.

Programmes for change

Change happens with focused activity. This is not an exhaustive list but provides a snapshot of some of the proactive work we are doing to build on existing successes in inclusion and diversity.

Autism access

We recently commissioned a small piece of work on how we can highlight how we welcome children, young people and families with autism. This is something many of our staff have lived experience of, and feedback from many families is that YHA has some real strengths in this area.

We are looking to develop our Inclusion Policy to highlight our work and have developed a series of blogs to help families navigate YHA's offer. We will be looking for at least one of our blogging champions to be a family with autistic children.

We are now reviewing the standards around Autism Access and have an ambition to be the leading residential provider for autistic children and young people. While recognising that all guests have individual needs, we know that this work will help shape inclusion more widely – including supporting those with anxiety or learning difficulties.

Disability

We know the challenges of physical access to some of our places and spaces. We need to address this – both in terms of physical adjustments but also further developing the information we provide to users and where we might work in partnership with providers towards better physical access. This is a factor in our capital strategy planning.

To support this work, we are setting up a small advisory group meeting. This was delayed from May and will now be set as a virtual first meet over the summer.

BAME

Alongside the Sport England Apprenticeship programme, we are actively seeking new partners to help us take our offer to new audiences.

We are setting up new policies on our imagery. It isn't good enough to have such a homogenous group reflecting YHA and we have just commissioned a documentary photographer to complement our existing photobank with images that must include VME people as well as a broader range of ages, backgrounds and abilities.

External benchmarks

We are looking to see which external benchmarks and commitments that we should sign up to. These are likely to include the ACEVO Diversity Pledge, Young Trustees Network and similar across other groups looking at diversity and access in staff, leadership and beneficiaries.

Pledges matter. As does supporting campaigns such as #blacklivesmatter and #pride.

But we know we can do more and we will continue to report on our progress over the months and years ahead.