



Access Unlimited

Response to the Dormant Assets Fund Consultation

1. Opportunities for further impact

Young people ('youth') are currently defined as one of the three causes to which Dormant Assets can be distributed to in England.

The Government consultation on this latest round of fund distribution identifies opportunities for potential further impact in these areas. For youth, it is suggested that funding could increase impact by better supporting the outdoors sector. This submission makes the case for how investment in this can help create sustainable provision that improves outcomes for young people across the country.

While the outdoor sector is broad, we have used the Institute of Outdoor Learning definition of what constitutes 'outdoor learning':

'Facilitated approaches that predominantly use activities and experiences in outdoors which lead to learning, increased health and wellbeing, and environmental awareness.'

2. About Access Unlimited

Access Unlimited is a coalition of not-for-profit school, residential and educational providers made up by YHA (England & Wales), The Outward Bound Trust, Scouts, Girlguiding, Field Studies Council and the 10 National Parks of England. The coalition capitalises on the combined reach of more than two million young people and influence on wider outdoor learning sector. The coalition delivers millions of outdoor learning experiences – from micro volunteering in nature through to two-week adventures in the most remote locations in the UK.

Our aim is simple:

To ensure that there are opportunities for every child and young person to access high quality learning and residential experiences both in our National Parks and AONBs and in local green and blue spaces including our collective networks of hostels, campsites and activity centres.

This was important before the pandemic, but with over half a million young people missing out on a residential this year and two million households going through lockdown without a garden, it is now more important than ever.

Throughout 2022, Access Unlimited ran Generation Green – one of the largest outdoor learning projects of recent years. This 16-month government funded project connected young people to nature, created and saved jobs, and built an aspirant workforce for a green recovery.

More than 115,000

opportunities were delivered to enable young people to connect to nature

39,476

young people experienced a facilitated day or residential trip, or self-led experience in nature

33%

of young people undertaking a day or residential trip were from an ethnic minority background

88%

felt more confident being outdoors

91%

of the young people reached through Generation Green said that they felt more connected to nature

Through new jobs, training, volunteering roles, residentials and outdoor and online learning experiences, the project reached more than 115,000 young people¹.

This – and similar programmes – needs ongoing investment to ensure that all children and young people can benefit from outdoor learning.

Access Unlimited and our extended network of partners offer:

- support for parents and under 5 to access time away from home in outdoor spaces developing effective approaches to outdoor learning
- day visits and residentials 5-11 year olds – thorough schools and through home education – drawing on the most effective approaches in outdoor learning
- day visits, residentials, volunteering and work roles with 11-26 year olds – developing a new generation able to pursue careers in environmental roles, outdoor learning and the rural hospitality and activity sector

3. The need, and how outdoor learning can help

- Analysis from Nuffield Trust has shown the disproportionate harming effect the Covid-19 pandemic has had on the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people². The pandemic exacerbated a problem that was already substantial into something deeply troubling. One in six children aged 6-to-16 were identified as having a probable mental health problem in July 2021 – a huge increase from the already troubling one in nine in 2017³

¹ www.yha.org.uk/sites/default/files/uploads/PDFs/Generation%20Green/generation-green-celebration-and-impact-report.pdf

² www.nuffieldtrust.org.uk/resource/growing-problems-in-detail-covid-19-s-impact-on-health-care-for-children-and-young-people-in-england

³ www.thecommissiononyounglives.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/COYL-Heads-Up-Report-July-2022.pdf

- The Centre for Mental Health has also estimated that 1.5 million children and young people in England will need either new or additional mental health support as a result of the pandemic⁴
- However, the benefits of accessing outdoor spaces on wellbeing are clear. Independent evaluation of the Generation Green programme, delivered by the Access Unlimited coalition, showed participation in programmes led to:⁵
 - positive impact on aspects of young people’s wellbeing that relate to their relationships, resilience, confidence and independence, as well as emotions such as feelings of peace, calm and relaxation
 - immediate significant impact in young people’s connection with nature and sense of inclusion in nature
 - residential trips also led to a significant increase in young people’s understanding of the importance of caring for nature; the trips also benefited the young people’s wellbeing by improving their confidence to make new friends
- The Ramblers referred to the importance of “Being connected with nature, the beauty and the elements” and another that National Parks and AONBs are important for “providing a feeling of freedom and spiritual renewal, and escape from widespread industrialisation and the disconnection from our physical world that comes with it”⁶
- However, currently 18% of children living in the most deprived areas never visit the natural environment at all, whilst 20% fewer Visibly Minority Ethnic (VME) children go out into green spaces weekly compared to white, middle class children⁷
- Where children and young people are presenting severe mental health issues, clinical interventions are needed. What is clear though, is that a huge opportunity exists to help prevent lower-level conditions turning into more severe ones. However, investment in upstream interventions such as Scouts and Girlguiding can help to support young people’s needs earlier on, whilst also saving money in the medium and long term. It is also exactly what young people say they want
- Girlguiding’s Girls’ Attitudes Survey 2020 found that 61% of girls and young women aged 11 to 21 say being part of a youth group or club makes them feel accepted, 60% feel connected to others, and 58% say they learn new skills. We also know from the survey that 72% of girls aged 11 to 21 know of other girls and young women their own age who experience anxiety disorders⁸
- The Commission on Young Lives July 2022 – ‘Heads Up’ report on young people’s mental health services outlines that *‘young people themselves talk a lot about prevention...they want to be able to go for walks and for day trips, to sometimes escape the situations they find themselves within and ‘reset’. For these young people who are often living in vulnerable conditions, they need this relational aspect as an effective ‘circuit breaker’*
- This correlates with other large engagement exercises from DCMS’s Youth Review⁹ and the Children’s Commissioner’s Big Ask survey¹⁰ – *‘They want to be healthy – mentally and physically. They want to escape the digital labyrinth in which they have been trapped. This report tells you that they want to be outside – to be in open spaces, and play’*

⁴ www.centreformentalhealth.org.uk/publications/covid-19-and-nations-mental-health-october-2020

⁵ www.yha.org.uk/sites/default/files/uploads/PDFs/Generation%20Green/generation-green-celebration-and-impact-report.pdf

⁶ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/833726/landscapes-review-final-report.pdf

⁷ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/833726/landscapes-review-final-report.pdf

⁸ www.girlguiding.org.uk/globalassets/docs-and-resources/research-and-campaigns/girls-attitudes-survey-2020.pdf

⁹ www.gov.uk/government/publications/youth-review-summary-findings-and-government-response

¹⁰ www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/occ_the_big_ask_the_big_answer_2021.pdf

- Defra Landscapes Review refers to the ‘Skills Builder Project’ – an 18-month pilot project in the Peaks which offers offenders on probation a 12-week training programme, where they engage in conservation-related activities at a range of countryside sites. The programme had a powerful influence, with the project re-offending rate of 8.7% set against a national average of 27%, and many attendees have reported improved motivation to avoid reoffending, reduce alcohol and drug intake, access training/employment, improved health and motivations, as well as increased self-confidence and self-esteem¹¹
- Evaluation of Outward Bounds Trust’s residential programme showed that young people who take part in their programme report that: ‘their horizons are broadened, they are more confident that their future is something they can influence and are less fearful of challenges: they are able to make changes to strengthen their wellbeing and increase the chance of them flourishing’¹²
- There is a huge and almost untapped opportunity to utilise open spaces, cost-effectively treating health conditions against a backdrop of financial pressures on health population. Recent research put the savings from every £1 invested as £7 of health and wellbeing benefits¹³
- In launching the government’s Strategy for Sustainability and Climate Change in Education in early 2022, the Department for Education noted that access to green spaces has significant impact on children’s learning, health and wellbeing but that access is not equal. Moreover, while connections to nature and outdoor learning are stronger in young children, this diminishes significantly into teenage years, with a clear need to ensure repeated and regular high quality learning experiences both close to home and further away¹⁴

4. Investment in the outdoor learning sector can create sustainable, accessible and equitable provision that improves outcomes for young people

As outlined above, we know that there are significant benefits for young people being involved in the outdoors sector. There are however a number of issues that the sector faces. There is a once-in-a-generation opportunity for dormant assets funding to be used to help the sector solve the following problems and create sustainable, accessible and equitable provision for years to come.

Helping us to meet significant and immediate demand

- Following the pandemic, where many children and young people were cut off from friends, activities and outdoor spaces, the existing mental health crisis in this age group has only been exacerbated
- A short-term solution to help widen participation for outdoor learning is providing bursaries to parents of young people via Access Unlimited, making these experiences cheaper or free at the point of access; key issues that can be barriers to participation are cost to parents and expensive/poor transport links for many young people who live in areas of deprivation; where there is willingness to underwrite these sorts of bursaries, there will be impact on improving access
- The outdoors sector is naturally expensive to run, whilst our market is one which often cannot, or will not pay more for our services; we, like others, are also noticing huge rising costs as a result of the cost of living crisis – making it even more difficult to sustain our offer

¹¹ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/833726/landscapes-review-final-report.pdf

¹² www.outwardbound.org.uk/assets/pdf/uploads/Impact/Reconnecting-relationships-reawakening-minds-and-restoring-confidence-impact-report.pdf

¹³ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/833726/landscapes-review-final-report.pdf

¹⁴ www.gov.uk/government/publications/sustainability-and-climate-change-strategy/sustainability-and-climate-change-a-strategy-for-the-education-and-childrens-services-systems

Short term funding to 'jump start' long term sustainability and sufficiency

- Bursaries, whilst helpful in the immediate term, or to address directly the impact of the cost of living crisis, will not solve the longer term issue of making outdoor experiences accessible in a sustainable way
- There is a once-in-a-generation opportunity for the dormant assets fund to be used to help the outdoor learning sector be able to help ourselves in the future – 'give a man a rod rather than a fish'; the Access Unlimited partners are models of charities that trade – generating their own sustainable income streams; these partners have used government support well to navigate the last two years of restrictions and now have strong recovery plans to return to trading surpluses over the year ahead
- A model that is used in our sector is fundraising to offset costs of delivery; dormant assets funding could be targeted in this way to provide organisations in our sector with fixed term staff, who would build fundraising capacity over a period of three years – with the aim of it then becoming self-funding by the end of this period; fundraising campaigns are greatly improved with government match funding
- The result would be that in the long term, it would mean the accessibility subsidies to those who need it we discuss above, could actually be delivered by providers rather than public funding, making our services accessible and sustainable

Capital investment in outdoor centres

- Whilst there has been £368 million of capital funding made available for youth spaces in levelling-up areas, this funding does not reach the outdoor learning sector, despite our reach to young people
- Many centres are operating with outdated building stock; a settlement that would allow renovation and refreshing of premises across Access Unlimited would have two-fold benefits for access and sustainability of outdoor learning
- Modernising facilities has the dual advantage of reducing costs, which can be passed on to the customer, whilst also increasing demand in the long term by providing a more attractive consumer experience
- Investment from the government's Cultural Recovery Fund enabled YHA to successfully reopen, as well as communicate with 10,000 schools, resulting in over 400 new school residential trip bookings
- As an example, Scout Adventures know from investing in their own centres, where new accommodation and activity provision has led to a 2.5x increase in participation within two years of the facilities being open
- Investment could also be well targeted at populous areas specifically; Scout Adventures give an example of targeted investment in their Oxfordshire centre which led to 250% growth within two years, with further growth beyond that period; the centre, pre-pandemic, worked with 40,000 people
- Strategic investment in certain types of equipment for existing centres could also have the knock-on effect of stimulating further demand in the long run – e.g. providing upfront costs for tented villages could help providers to cater outdoor experiences for large groups at low costs

Developing 'hub and spoke' equipment hubs

- In areas of deprivation particularly, equipment and storage can be particular barriers to helping young people access outdoor experiences
- Many areas are caught in a trap of lower existing provision, whilst new and emerging provision struggles with upfront costs and are less likely to own their own spaces
- Something that could help combat this is for dormant assets funding to be used to develop a network of 'equipment hubs' around the country; this could be hosted by outdoor activity providers, who would store and then loan out high quality equipment for local groups, saving them money on storage, renting and costs of purchasing, meaning more new groups and those in areas of deprivation could help give young people access to the outdoors

Creating a sustainable workforce and volunteer pipeline

- The pandemic and the cost of living crisis have decimated the workforce pipeline for the outdoors sector
- Spiralling costs have meant that we are unable to compete with other industries financially and develop new talent as effectively as we once could; targeted support for workforce development could help to deliver a fit-for-purpose workforce for the future
- Specific funding through the Access Unlimited coalition could help us to deliver bespoke training and development to the whole sector, closing the skills gaps that has emerged, and ensuring that across the sector staffing becomes more sustainable and encourages retention; significant expertise exists amongst the coalition that could be effectively harnessed – e.g. Field Studies Council has popular teacher training approaches, as well as structured training for biodiversity survey and related projects; YHA has approaches that support rural hospitality and jobs in outdoor sector; working together coalitions such as Access Unlimited could use funding to create new pathways drawing on work and volunteer opportunities in more than one organisation
- One-off funding from dormant assets could also fund specific programmes to target volunteers for a generation – creating system change that could aid the retention of volunteers that will last for many years to come
- Supporting us to develop a sustainable workforce and volunteers will also deliver sustainable improvements in local skills, and create jobs that can help to level up deprived areas
- We know jobs in the ‘green sector’ are amongst the least accessible from those in levelling up areas and from across BAME groups; Generation Green has provided a model for closer working with schools, youth groups and community groups to develop new routes into the environment sector

Supporting schools and youth programmes to ensure there is better access outdoor education

- While investments in programmes such as NCS and the Duke of Edinburgh Award are welcome, these are predicated on a strong outdoor learning sector to provide day and residential outdoor learning experiences and volunteering opportunities
- Similarly, while it is welcome that the Department for Education recognise the value of outdoor learning and residential to academic catch-up, enrichment and wellbeing agendas, these rely on strong support for both on-site outdoor learning and for outdoor learning outside of the school groups
- In addition to strengthening the capacity of sector listed above to deliver these experiences, funding could usefully be deployed to:
 - Support schools and youth organisations with travel costs, increasingly being reported as a barrier to more adventurous/further from home outdoor learning
 - Kit costs, both for on-site work and for day and residential experiences
 - Staff time in schools/youth organisations, both for staff development and for staff engagement in outdoor learning on site and further afield

5. Summary

Outdoor learning impacts on health & well-being, academic achievement, routes to a range of employment opportunities and to protecting the environment.

Access to high quality outdoor learning is not equitable. But there are evidenced approaches – such as Generation Green – that can reduce inequities.

Additional investment through Dormant Assets and other funding streams can:

- support access through subsidies and targeted work
protect valuable capital assets
- develop an outdoor learning workforce for this generation
- ensure the delivery of current and future government commitments to children and young people and their families

Funding should be targeted at not-for-profit organisations able to demonstrate a range of models to sustain their future operations.

For further information

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