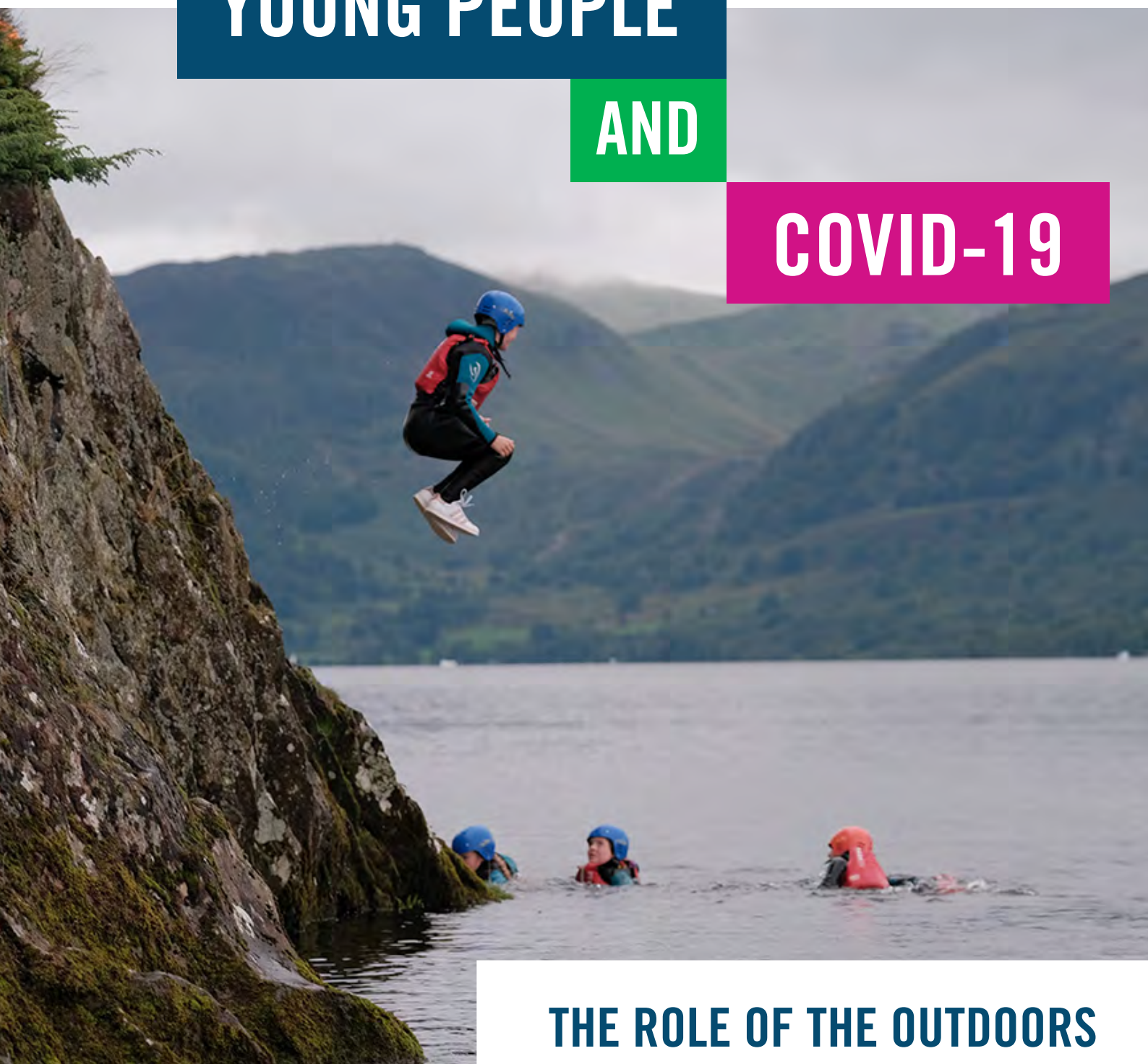


YOUNG PEOPLE

AND

COVID-19



**THE ROLE OF THE OUTDOORS
FOR THEIR RECOVERY,
RESILIENCE AND WELLBEING**

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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Children and young people across the UK have had their lives turned upside down by the COVID-19 pandemic. Almost every young person has had to adjust to dramatic changes in their education or employment, routine, home and social life. All of them now need support to readjust and reconnect.

Young people have been disproportionately affected socially and economically by the pandemic. They will likely continue to feel the impacts of this 'crisis of a generation' well into their adult life. Accordingly, we see this as our 'once in a generation' chance to allow the countryside to reach its full potential for all young people who are struggling right now.

Prior to COVID-19, the mental health of our young people was already on a precipice. There is an increasing prevalence of mental disorders, and the 2019 Princes Trust Youth Index suggests that young people's wellbeing has declined significantly – reaching its lowest point since the study was first commissioned in 2009. Young people report feeling overwhelmed by political and economic uncertainty and the lack of control over their futures. The turbulence of childhood and adolescence only adds to these sources of stress and anxiety.

Our recent [mental health and resilience report](#) highlights two key barriers to promoting health and wellbeing, related to some distinct lifestyle changes:

1. Young people are spending more time indoors and are less likely to be physically active, reducing the opportunity for them to benefit from the positive correlation between physical health and mental wellbeing; and
2. Young people are spending much more time on social media, which has been linked to increased rates of anxiety, depression and poor sleep.

The health and wellbeing benefits of nature and the outdoors are well documented, providing a stimulating and restorative environment, enabling positive social contact and encouraging physical movement. But there's lots of inequality in people's ability to access the outdoors, and those who have least access to nature have the lowest levels of physical health and mental wellbeing.

The UK lockdown has heightened these barriers, imposed new ones and exacerbated inequalities across young people. Specifically, this report highlights that:

- Feelings of isolation and the challenges associated with maintaining friendships have been some of the most acute impacts of lockdown for young people
- For those with history of mental health issues, lockdown has led to deterioration in their mental health
- Young people in relative poverty and minority groups have heightened concerns about the virus and its long-term impacts
- Young people have faced significant disruption to key formal and informal support structures such as referrals and treatments, school services, extra-curricular youth clubs, trusted adults and friends
- There are over one million young people with known 'needs' that have been amplified by the pandemic, and an estimated two million with emerging needs triggered by COVID-19
- Young people have reported long-term worries about the impact of school closures on their future prospects, particularly those at key points of transition in their education

- Disadvantaged students are around 18 months behind their advantaged peers by the time they take their GCSEs, and the pandemic-induced period of home schooling is only likely to have exacerbated this gap
- The pandemic has created a triple shock – it is destroying young people’s current employment situations, disrupting their education and training, and putting major roadblocks in the way of entering the labour market
- Globally, more than 1 in 6 young people are out of work due to COVID-19. It has been reported that 9% of 18-24 year olds across the UK have lost their jobs altogether, which is the highest figure out of all age groups.

These are all very real problems that young people are facing, negatively impacting them now, in their immediate future and longer term. As we emerge from lockdown, in order to support young people to deal with these challenges and minimise the long term effects, we must teach them how to protect their wellbeing, complement their learning and training, and add value and support where other options are limited. That’s why we’re championing the role of nature and outdoor learning in supporting young people’s transitions into a post-COVID world.

Outdoor education is a form of education that engages young people and helps to ensure that no young person falls through the gaps. It focuses on developing *essential* skills - those highly transferable skills that everyone needs to support their use of specialist knowledge and technical skills. These skills (including problem solving, leadership and teamwork) have been linked to improved academic attainment, professional competencies, self-efficacy and social and emotional wellbeing. Post-pandemic, outdoor learning is an aspect of young people’s education that will be more relevant than ever. We know that some groups of young people have been hit harder than others, and outdoor education, in its varying guises, provides a learning setting that can be adapted to meet the needs of all participants.

By its very nature, operating in natural environments outside, outdoor education is a means of both positively affecting wellbeing and attainment, and reducing the potential for the transmission of COVID-19 when safety guidelines are followed. At Outward Bound we’re adapting how we work – to provide small group residential programmes for apprentices and graduates, taking Outward Bound to schools across the UK until students can come to us and offering 1000 free days of adventure at our centres during the school holidays for young people. We’re showing that even during a global pandemic, learning in the outdoors can be undertaken safely. Our style of outdoor education can be designed and delivered to provide targeted support that builds confidence and resilience in young people, particularly those who are, or have become vulnerable as a result of the pandemic. It can provide safe and flexible learning spaces both on- and off-site that support blended learning (mixing remote and face-to-face delivery) and social distancing.



The mountains, rivers, flora and fauna have been unaffected by the pandemic and they are waiting for us to return to them. Lockdown has heightened our appreciation of the natural world and this is an opportunity to integrate this appreciation into our education models more holistically. This is our ‘once in a generation chance’ to connect young people with nature and ensure it reaches its potential for all those struggling right now.

2. INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 has caused almost every young person in the UK to face changes in their education or employment, routine, home and social life. Groups who were already marginalised or disadvantaged are now likely to become more so. Critically, every child has had a very different experience of lockdown. For some it has felt safe and enjoyable, and for others challenging or traumatic. But all need support to readjust and reconnect.

Whilst young people may be less vulnerable to infection from the virus, they have been disproportionately affected by its wider impacts. Children and young people are some of the worst affected groups in society socially and economically. They must be our priority as we focus on adapting to this new way of life.

The 2019 Glover review into the future of our National Parks and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs)¹ called for a stronger mission to connect all people to these places, to enable us all to reap the benefits of these restorative environments. National Parks were created in part to provide a healing space in post-war Britain, and as John Muir tells us, “everyone needs beauty as well as bread, places to play in, [...] where nature may heal and give strength to body and soul”.ⁱ The Wellbeing Valueⁱⁱ associated with frequent use of parks and green spaces is worth approximately £34 billion per year.² Our AONBs, local parks, greenbelt and pockets of countryside should once again provide healing spaces in our COVID-19 recovery – especially for young people.



ⁱ Cited in the Glover review.

ⁱⁱ Research conducted using HM Treasury best-practice for valuing non-market goods.

That is why CPREⁱⁱⁱ – the countryside charity – have recently launched their regeneration manifesto,³ to urge the government to invest in the countryside and access to green space, to break down barriers to access, and guarantee that children and young people’s education includes quality time in nature, whatever their background. More than ever before we need to make sure that young people make lifelong connections with nature to help them bounce back from the pandemic and build resilience for the challenges that inevitably lie ahead.

This report takes the CPRE’s manifesto as its starting point. This is our ‘once in a generation chance’ to allow the countryside to reach its full potential and help all young people who are struggling right now. The following pages highlight these struggles, drawing on the wealth of recent research with young people to understand the impact of the pandemic on their lives and explore the role of nature and outdoor learning in supporting young people’s transitions into a post-COVID world.

We also want to use this space as a platform for young people’s voices in our national COVID-19 recovery. Children and young people are not too young to follow lockdown rules, miss their family and friends, and worry about their future. They are not too young to be at the sharp end of this pandemic. This means they are not too young to have their voices heard, and they need to be central to every aspect of our post-lockdown decision making. Many young people felt ignored by the government at the height of the pandemic,⁴ with a lack of information targeted specifically at them. This has to change and we need to have conversations with young people, to bring their voices to the table and ensure decisions are made with them, not for them. That’s why we asked young people what lockdown has been like for them (both the good and the bad). We wanted to hear what support they need now – and this report is centred on their words.^{iv} At Outward Bound, we have a role to play: in both drawing attention to young people’s views and needs; and using our knowledge and skill to help ensure they are equipped to deal with the challenges that undoubtedly lie ahead.

**“CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE ARE NOT TOO YOUNG TO FOLLOW LOCKDOWN RULES,
MISS THEIR FAMILY AND FRIENDS, AND WORRY ABOUT THEIR FUTURE.
THEY ARE NOT TOO YOUNG TO BE AT THE SHARP END OF THIS PANDEMIC. THIS MEANS THEY ARE
NOT TOO YOUNG TO HAVE THEIR VOICES HEARD”**



ⁱⁱⁱ www.cpre.org.uk

^{iv} Our ‘Outward Bound COVID-19 response survey was open between 31 August and 21 September 2020 and received 234 responses from young people or parent/guardians. Responses from survey participants are incorporated into this report.

3. PRE-PANDEMIC: YOUNG PEOPLE'S WELLBEING

In 2019, we published a [report](#) exploring the state of young people's health and wellbeing, and the role of nature in both mitigating against poor mental health and contributing to overall wellbeing.⁵ At the time, the picture of young people's wellbeing was deeply concerning.

There is an increasing prevalence of mental disorders in young people, in particular emotional disorders.⁶ Childhood and adolescence is a turbulent time when so much happens for young people, including: transitions between and within education, training and employment; exam pressures; puberty; sexual maturation and development, changing friendship groups; and family changes (siblings, moving house, divorce, etc). Any of these factors can be a source of stress and anxiety.

The 2019 Princes Trust Youth Index suggests that young people's wellbeing has fallen to its lowest level since the study was first commissioned in 2009.⁷ This drop is related to political and economic uncertainty, with the number of young people who do not feel in control of their lives increasing by 33% on 2017 figures. The latest Child and Adolescent Mental Health Survey (CAMHS) from the Office of National Statistics found that 1 in 8 young people aged 5-19 have a clinically diagnosed mental health problem.⁸ Many of these issues continue to impact on social positioning into adulthood.

Physical health and mental health and wellbeing are inextricably linked, with poor mental health significantly increasing the risk of poor physical health, and vice versa.⁹ Whilst we may often associate health with the absence of disease or illness, 'wellbeing' is much broader, defined by DEFRA as:¹⁰

"A positive physical, social and mental state; it is not just the absence of pain, discomfort and incapacity. It requires that basic needs are met, that individuals have a sense of purpose, and that they feel able to achieve important personal goals and participate in society. It is enhanced by conditions that include supportive personal relationships, strong and inclusive communities, good health, financial and personal security, rewarding employment, and a healthy and attractive environment."

This definition demonstrates that wellbeing crosscuts the breadth of young people's lives. Seeking ways to encourage all aspects of wellbeing are essential for preventing poor mental and physical health, and corresponding reduced life chances in later life.

Our report outlined a number of barriers to promoting health and wellbeing in young people today.⁵ These broadly align with lifestyle changes, which mean young people are spending more time indoors, are less likely to be physically active,¹¹ and spend much more time on social media – linked with increased rates of anxiety, depression, and poor sleep.¹² These barriers are compounded by rising inequality. The Wildlife Trust highlights that those with the least access to nature also have the lowest levels of physical health and mental wellbeing.¹³ The CPRE manifesto also makes reference to the stark inequalities that exist in who is able to make use of green space and countryside near their home. The 2020 Green Space Index from Fields in Trust shows that five English regions fall below the minimum standard of green space provision, with 2.7 million people in the UK not living within a 10-minute walk of green space.¹⁴ This inequality of access is evidenced by the fact that young people from the most deprived socio-economic areas are 1.2 times more likely to report low life satisfaction than those from the least deprived group.¹⁵

4. THE IMPACT OF LOCKDOWN

We know that young people are facing a particular set of challenges and a corresponding trend in declining levels of wellbeing. Then the coronavirus pandemic caused UK-wide lockdown. School closures and cancelled exams, uncertainty in education and employment transitions, social distancing and isolation, and potential personal bereavement are just some of the factors now compounding what are already stressful times in young people's lives.

We are acutely aware of the likely long-term impact on young people, and in turn their health and wellbeing and future progression. Unicef UK have billed it the "crisis of a generation",¹⁶ and the United Nations captured the wide-reaching effects of COVID-19 in a recent policy brief:¹⁷

"The pandemic is having profound effects on children's mental wellbeing, their social development, their safety, their privacy, their economic security".

Given the scale of the pandemic, it is no surprise that young people have been reporting higher levels of anxiety, increased emotional distress, feelings of uncertainty and a lack of control.¹⁸ A number of surveys and research studies have sought to explore the impact, through the experiences of youth sector organisations, parents and young people themselves.^v The most common findings relate to mental health, the increased vulnerability of young people 'at risk', uncertainty around educational attainment and worries about their futures and the future of the country.



^v Surveys relating to young people and COVID-19 have been collated on the National Youth Agency website: <https://nya.org.uk/available-surveys-during-the-covid-19-pandemic/>

4.1 Loneliness and mental health

Mental health support for young people was a challenging area of public policy, even before COVID-19.¹⁹ Now we see young people's wellbeing and mental health being significantly negatively affected by lockdown conditions. According to the Office for National Statistics,²⁰ those aged 16-24 are more than twice as likely to have experiences of 'lockdown loneliness' as those aged 55-69.

“YOUNG PEOPLE AGED 16-24 ARE MORE THAN TWICE AS LIKELY TO HAVE EXPERIENCES OF ‘LOCKDOWN LONELINESS’ AS THOSE AGED 55-69.”

Findings from the Children's Society Annual household survey,¹⁸ conducted with 2000+ young people aged 10-17, show that whilst the decline in children and young people's wellbeing predates the pandemic, higher proportions are reporting lower wellbeing than usual. Whilst young people reported that in many areas of their lives they are coping ok, feelings of isolation and reduced contact with friends have been the most acute negative impacts of the pandemic. These findings are reflected elsewhere, with a recent poll conducted for Barnardo's by YouGov reporting a rise in issues related to mental health and wellbeing for at least one in three of the participating 4,000 children and young people (aged 8-24 in the UK).⁴ Over two-thirds said that not seeing their friends was one of the three hardest things about lockdown. In our own survey, many young people also highlighted this as one of the most difficult aspects for them:

“I found not being able to see and hug my friends and family really difficult. I found that not seeing people really made me feel down. I particularly found that physical touch I really missed and I realised how just hugging someone can make you feel better.”

(Outward Bound Trust COVID-19 survey respondent)

COVID-19 has also led to growing feelings of anxiety for young people around both the physical health and social impacts of the virus:

“I get a bit nervous about the future considering how quick everything has moved since lockdown eased. It's worrying to think you could catch it so easily and pass it on so quickly.”

(Outward Bound Trust COVID-19 survey respondent)

“I'm a lot more anxious and on edge, I lack a lot of confidence and can't do anything on my own due to being isolated.”

(Outward Bound Trust COVID-19 survey respondent)

These feelings of anxiety appear to be impacting some groups of young people particularly severely. In the Children's Society annual survey, a higher proportion of young people in relative poverty stated that they were 'very worried' about the virus and its long-term impacts (23%) versus their peers not in relative poverty (15%).¹⁸ Findings from the Kooth digital support service (a provider of NHS-funded online mental health support) show that the mental wellbeing of young people from black and minority ethnic backgrounds (BAME) has been disproportionately affected – with the number of BAME U-18s seeking support increasing by 11.4%, versus 3% for their white peers.²¹

In their second impact survey, YoungMinds reported that for young people with a history of specific mental health needs, the vast majority believe lockdown conditions have led to a deterioration in their mental health.²² 87% reported feeling lonely or isolated, with specific concerns relating to: a lack of motivation and feelings of unproductiveness; anxiety around both the virus and the easing of lockdown conditions; and a lack of access to their usual coping mechanisms such as seeing friends and attending classes. In our survey, both young people and parents/guardians commented on the significant negative impact that not being able to attend sports and youth clubs has had, as they are so often a source of friendship, routine and relief from other aspects of their lives. For some young people this is particularly challenging, as one parent reported:

“My child has some additional needs (ASD) and does not have friends. We rely on college and planned activities like Outward Bound to give him exposure to his peers and physical activity in a structured environment – the structure is key and we have lost all routine for him and access to peers.” (Outward Bound Trust COVID-19 survey respondent)

One of the biggest challenges of the pandemic for young people has been the disruption to their support structures – both formally through cancelled referrals or treatment, and informally through not being able to see friends and trusted adults.



4.2 Increased vulnerabilities

Whilst almost every young person has had to adjust to the new normal, for some, the ability to bounce back is even more compromised. The pandemic has sharpened inequalities across all spheres of life and those who are already marginalised or disadvantaged are now likely to become more so.

There are over one million young people with known needs that have been amplified and an estimated two million with emerging needs triggered by COVID-19.²³ Only 5% of vulnerable young people known by social services to be at risk were in school before the Easter holiday, and over a million young people face risks from any of the 'toxic trio': living in households with addiction, poor mental health or domestic abuse.²⁴ Self-isolation and social distancing are not possible for many families and many young people are now in potentially unsafe environments, without access to trusted or confidential advice, and vulnerable to gang related activity or exploitation.²⁵

Specific concerns from youth sector organisations in the early stages of lockdown revolved around the increased level of risk to vulnerable young people, including:^{26,27}

- Increased risk of mental health issues due to isolation and reduced support
- Increased risk from being at home (domestic violence, substance abuse, alcohol abuse, increased poverty through job uncertainty)
- Lack of safe spaces or someone to turn to who they can trust
- Higher risk of sexual exploitation or grooming
- Increased use of social media and online pressures
- Higher risk for engaging in gangs, substance misuse, carrying weapons or other harmful practices
- Increased risk in transitions due to lack of support eg school/college/university
- Alternative youth provision not reaching those who are most vulnerable or with special educational needs and disability (SEND).

As lockdown conditions change, ease or lift, we should not assume that these risks will go away. The pandemic comes at a time when the youth sector has been at the forefront of funding cuts, with an estimated £959 million reduction in spending on youth services in England since 2010/11 and a 71% cut in local authority spending over the same period.²⁸ This amounts to a loss of more than 4,500 youth work jobs and more than 760 youth centres across the UK since 2012.²⁹

Indeed, the future of outdoor education has also become uncertain. Lots of centres haven't been able to operate since March and many aren't eligible for financial support from the government. This means that young people who are slipping through existing gaps in the system will become even more invisible.

Around 1 in 25 young people are considered 'at risk',²⁴ being affected by: persistent school absences or exclusion, dropping out of the school system after year 11, and missing from care. These young people are at high risk of becoming NEET (not in education, employment or training), and there are many more who may struggle to adapt after six months out of school. On top of this, we know that young people are currently less likely to seek the support they need – they don't want to overburden the NHS or their families, they don't feel their need is great enough, or they lack the space or resources to benefit from virtual support.²² Without rapid action to support these specific groups, there is a real danger of exposing a whole generation of more vulnerable young people to long-term risks of unemployment, educational underachievement and exploitation.

4.3 Education and attainment

As well as increased levels of anxiety, mental health issues related to isolation and increased vulnerabilities, young people are, unsurprisingly, worried about their education. Young people in our survey frequently reported struggling with engaging with their schoolwork whilst studying online.

“The most difficult thing for me was the sudden change in routine, trying to keep myself and my studies on track without the activities in the week being a milestone to break it up.”

(Outward Bound Trust COVID-19 survey respondent)

Current concerns include the uncertainty of not knowing if or when their bubble may be required to isolate; catching up with school; rebuilding friendships and trying not to get ill or pass on the virus.³⁰

Young people also have longer-term worries around the impact of school closures on exam grades and future prospects. Those at key points of transition in their education – making life-changing decisions about their sixth form, college or university education – are experiencing these anxieties most acutely. This is not surprising, given that exam cancellations meant that grades were awarded based on a standardisation of teachers predicted grades.³¹ Research has shown that predicted grades often lead to the under-assessment of BAME and working-class pupils,³². Young people’s concerns have been realised, as nearly 40% of grades awarded were below teachers’ predictions.³³

Whilst there was some U-turn by the government on grades,³⁴ the biggest concern is that the negative impact of school closures and cancelled exams will still be felt sharply by the most disadvantaged young people. Disadvantaged students are around 18 months behind their advantaged peers by the time they take their GCSEs, and this gap is no longer closing.³⁵ The gap has widened for pupils from black backgrounds, particularly Black Caribbean, and those with English as an additional language, compared to White British pupils. Looked after children who are under the care of their local authority are nearly two and a half years (29 months) behind their peers, those receiving support from children’s services are 20 months behind their peers, and pupils with SEND are two full years (24 months) behind their peers.³⁵



Disadvantaged and vulnerable young people are already on the back foot in so many ways. Time out of school can have a devastating effect, with a loss of structure to young people’s days, disrupted friendship groups, and limited contact with teachers that is difficult to replace with online resources. Those who have not had the benefit of their usual network of formal and informal support, who have had no or less access to a computer or the internet, pens and paper, and who have lacked a supportive and productive learning and working environment will now fall further behind. These young people will likely also have suffered most acutely from some of the challenges outlined in this report so far, and it is therefore not just the learning they have missed out on. The lack of socialisation with their peers and wider circle of adults, which is so crucial for social, emotional and cognitive development, has been missing too. Without this, both their mental health and ability to re-engage in the classroom will suffer.

4.4 Employability and future prospects

For those young people transitioning from education to work, we know that there have been rising concerns about employment opportunities and the current job market. An International Labour Organisation report suggests that young workers will be disproportionately affected by COVID-19 in terms of their career opportunities “for decades”.³⁶

Globally, in 2019 the youth unemployment rate was higher than for any other group, and in general young people are more likely to be employed in low-paid and informal occupations. Now more than 1 in 6 young people worldwide are out of work³⁶. In the UK reports show that 9% of 18 to 24-year-olds have lost their jobs due to COVID-19, which is the highest figure out of all age groups.³⁷ According to the latest labour market information, in the UK there are currently 3.78 million 16-24 year olds in employment, down 100,000 from the last quarter.³⁸ Economic inactivity has increased with 2.56 million 16-24 year olds not in employment or looking for employment – 61,000 more than the last quarter.³⁸

The pandemic has created a triple shock: it is destroying young people’s current employment situations, disrupting education and training, and putting major roadblocks in the way of entering the labour market. A storm is brewing, and there is more to come as the job retention scheme winds down. Young people are one of the most likely to lose their jobs, find it harder to find work and feel the scarring effects of unemployment most acutely.

“[There is] lots of worry about school and the future. Very intimidating to see how badly the lockdown affected every single aspect of life. Made everything in the future more rocky and less certain which created a lot of extra stress.”

(Outward Bound Trust COVID-19 survey respondent)

There are, of course, government measures in place to support young people to access employment opportunities: additional funding for the ‘adopt an apprentice programme’ in Scotland; the UK government £2.1 billion Kickstart scheme to fund six-month high-quality work placements for 16-24 year olds at risk of long-term unemployment; and an £11 million investment in traineeships for young people. These schemes have broad eligibility, but there is still a risk that those who are most vulnerable are less likely to benefit from them, without the skills, confidence and structure to bounce back from the challenges they are facing.

“I have felt extremely uncertain of the future as things are changing so quickly, in particular if university is right for me or the high intake in the next few years.”

(Outward Bound Trust COVID-19 survey respondent)

There is a rising sense of a lack of choice and feelings of constraint across different aspects of their lives.¹⁸ This is not a new feeling,⁷ but one that the pandemic has compounded. Young people feel that the UK government lacks an understanding of the reality of their lives, and that measures put in place so far have not taken into account their life experiences and particular social contexts.³⁹ This crisis will have lasting consequences – there is no doubt about that – but it is essential that we listen to children and young people now and move quickly to address some of these emerging problems.

5. GETTING BACK TO OUTDOOR EDUCATION

We have highlighted some of the very real problems that young people are facing, which are negatively impacting them now, pose challenges for their immediate futures and will most likely affect the rest of their lives in some way. Many of these problems are not new, but they have been heightened by the pandemic and have become more difficult to overcome.

Some young people will struggle to transition back to school and employment and may need support to socialise after self-isolation or to cope with increased anxiety, trauma or bereavement. Others may be lacking confidence or direction after so much time without a set routine and will find it a challenge to conform to the structure of a school or working day. Some may simply be struggling to adjust to our strange new reality – where everything is not quite as they remember.



Photo shows an Outward Bound instructor leading an 'In School Adventure'

Resources available to young people have largely been focused on schools and further education institutions, with little acknowledgement of the untapped resource that youth sector organisations and employers of early careers talent represent. We believe that discouraging residentials and school trips is a policy blind spot – there are opportunities that are being missed to support young people's return to school or college and help to re-engage them in education. This is particularly the case for vulnerable young people where less formal educational settings are often more suitable. Whilst many youth sector organisations have reported challenges to accessing suitable indoor spaces to resume face-to-face delivery,⁴⁰ our adapted early careers programmes,^{vi} 'In School Adventures',⁴¹ and

^{vi} We are now running Early Careers programmes (for apprentices and graduates) at our Eskdale centre, adhering to government guidance on social distancing and in relation to the number of young people allowed to mix together.

#1000daysofadventure initiative^{vii} demonstrate that these learning opportunities can be undertaken safely. Questions over returning to education must move beyond concerns of missed content and the logistics of social distancing in the classroom. We cannot just expect young people to 'return to normal'. We need to be more creative in our responses – to listen to the needs of young people as they emerge from lockdown, to understand how to support them and re-engage them in effective ways.

“WE BELIEVE THAT DISCOURAGING RESIDENTIALS AND SCHOOL TRIPS IS A POLICY BLIND SPOT. THESE ARE MISSED OPPORTUNITIES TO SUPPORT YOUNG PEOPLE’S RECOVERY AND HELP TO RE-ENGAGE THEM IN EDUCATION.”

Fortunately, young people are talking about their coping mechanisms. Most encouraging of all is that the majority are doing their absolute best to stay positive. Many have reported being able to spend time with family as a benefit of lockdown conditions,⁴² as well as connecting with others:

“A good thing that came out of lockdown was quality family time that was spent. As a family we got closer due to the time that was being spent together!”
(Outward Bound Trust COVID-19 survey respondent)

“I have met amazing friends online to write pen-pal letters to, from Switzerland, to New Jersey, to California. It has been a real opportunity for me to expand my friend group and hopefully one day I will be able to visit them in person and build on our friendships even more.”
(Outward Bound Trust COVID-19 survey respondent)

Relief from some of the social pressures that impacted their daily lives prior to the pandemic has also been a positive impact of lockdown for some young people.³⁹

“My anxiety has calmed down because I haven’t been at school.”
(Outward Bound Trust COVID-19 survey respondent)

“[There has been] less pressure to interact with people, do things in certain “acceptable” ways. I like that I have more time for hobbies, as well.”
(Outward Bound Trust COVID-19 survey respondent)

Finally, many young people have reported reconnecting with old hobbies, or taking up new ones:

“[I] started crafting again. Forgot my love of art a long time ago and it's slowly coming back.”
(Outward Bound Trust COVID-19 survey respondent)

“[A benefit has been] learning to bake (new) and garden. Spending more time with my family. Time to go walking in my local area. More time for cycling.”
(Outward Bound Trust COVID-19 survey respondent)

Young people are doing some amazing things to support themselves, each other, their families and their wider communities.⁴³ Encouragingly, these self-care strategies reported by young people that focus on connecting with others, staying active and being creative¹⁸ align closely with The New Economics Foundation ‘five ways to wellbeing’.⁴⁴ These are five evidence-based actions: connect; be active; take notice; keep learning; and give, aimed at improving the population’s mental health and wellbeing. Our 2019 mental health report highlights the relationship between nature, NEF’s Five Ways to Wellbeing, and the Outward Bound approach.⁵ It

^{vii} Since August we have been running subsidised non-residential activity days at our centres for young people aged 11-17: <https://www.outwardbound.org.uk/adventure-days>

is telling that children and young people have reported focussing on staying connected with each other, spending time outdoors and in nature, and being physically active and creative, as ways to help them cope during the pandemic. These have not been the focus of government policies for young people, but moving forward, wellbeing needs to take precedence over academic attainment to ensure young people have some hope of emerging from lockdown conditions positively.



Young people have lacked access to wider and more informal youth provision (both in the form of interventions and preventative provision) during lockdown and these need to form part of our recovery for young people. Outdoor education is a form of education that engages young people and helps to ensure that no young person falls through the gaps – it helps to develop the social and emotional skills, behaviours and resilience needed in this fast-paced and changing world. Critically, outdoor learning programmes commonly focus on developing a range of *essential* skills - those highly transferable skills that everyone needs to support their use of specialist knowledge and technical skills. These skills, including: problem solving; leadership; teamwork; communication; and raised aspirations and motivation, have been linked to improved academic attainment, professional competencies, self-efficacy and social and emotional wellbeing.⁴⁵ Over 85% of young people in our survey viewed the following essential skills as being ‘useful’ or ‘very useful’ to them over the next 12-18 months: resilience (91%), team work and communications (89%), and leadership skills (87%). These skills were viewed in line with the need for social and emotional skills such as self-confidence and

positive affect (and associated mental wellbeing), with 91% and 93% of respondents deeming these 'useful' or 'very useful' respectively. The recent review by the Centre for Education and Youth (CfEY) suggests that essential skills interventions are most impactful when they are regular, long term, embedded, supported and targeted.⁴⁴

The views of young people expressed in this report, alongside the findings from the CfEY, suggests that, post-pandemic, outdoor learning opportunities are an aspect of young people's education that will be more relevant than ever. Residential outdoor learning can be adapted to meet the needs of all participants and provides a new context for building relationships that can strengthen peer and adult-child friendships,^{46,47}. Spending time outside in nature has been demonstrated to improve wellbeing through its restorative effects, as well as through providing opportunities for positive social contact and physical activity⁴⁸. Where outdoor learning focuses on personal growth and development, it can contribute to the development of positive and effective behaviours and attitudes.⁴⁹ In addition, young people have reported that lockdown has raised their awareness of the climate crisis and the importance of taking care of the environment. This is our 'once in a generation chance' to connect young people with nature, and ensure it reaches its potential for all those struggling right now.

By the very nature of its location, outdoor education provides an environment that both positively affects wellbeing and attainment,^{13,50,viii} and reduces the potential for the transmission of COVID-19. The national guidance in Scotland highlights that "an outdoor setting does not need a fully functioning building to deliver high quality, flexible early learning and childcare",⁵¹ and now is the time to make the most of the outdoors as a learning environment for all young people. Outdoor education can be designed and delivered to provide targeted support that builds confidence and resilience in young people, particularly those who are, or have become vulnerable as a result of the pandemic. It can provide safe and flexible learning spaces both on- and off-site that support blended learning (mixing remote and face-to-face delivery) as well as social distancing.⁵² It stands in direct opposition to remote teaching and the shortcomings of such an approach, and we believe that blended learning should necessarily incorporate the outdoors for the long-term interests of young people. Maximising the use of outdoor spaces, encouraging connections with nature, and drawing on existing good practice can help to enable social distancing, meet curriculum outcomes, and support the wellbeing of young people.⁵³

Finally, whilst the rush to green spaces as a reaction to the pandemic demonstrates our connection with nature as a key source of wellbeing,⁵⁴ we know that there is variability in access and many groups struggle to reap these benefits (see section 3).⁵⁵ This is why, at Outward Bound, we pride ourselves on being the largest UK provider of bursary-assisted outdoor learning, and our 1000 Days of Adventure initiative^{ix} has been offering free places to young people eligible for free school meals. We know that we need to facilitate access to build engagement with natural environments – only then will young people be able to maximise the benefits that being outdoors can bring. The education sector needs to adapt to new ways of working, and outdoor education can be at the centre of this. This adaptability may open the door for more diverse and universally accessible forms of outdoor learning to be incorporated into the curriculum and potentially pave the way for more socially just outdoor learning opportunities for young people.

^{viii}A list of resources evidencing the positive impact of outdoor learning on young people's wellbeing and attainment can found on the Outdoor Education Advisors Panel (OEAP) website: <https://oeapng.info/downloads/making-the-case/>

^{ix} The Outward Bound Trust have been offering non-residential adventure days at their residential centres since August 2020 to enable young people to access some form of outdoor education as lockdown conditions ease: <https://www.outwardbound.org.uk/adventure-days>

6. CONCLUSION: WHAT NEXT?

In this report we have presented the current state affairs for young people. Whilst education has been prioritised as lockdown conditions are eased, distinct challenges for young people remain, and this will not merely be a ‘blip’ in their journey to adulthood. This pandemic will *define* their adulthood, particularly for those who are most vulnerable.

We are concerned for the sustainability of our centres, and all outdoor centres, but we are more concerned by what it might mean for this generation of young people if outdoor learning ceases to be an opportunity for them. We know that spending time in, and building a relationship with the outdoors provides a multitude of health and wellbeing benefits that are currently underutilised and not universally accessible. We also know that outdoor learning takes those benefits, magnifies them, and builds on them – and is therefore an ideal environment for young people to develop essential skills that they might be lacking right now, and will most certainly need to draw upon in the future.

We’re supporting the CPRE’s regeneration manifesto, calling for young people’s education to include quality time in nature. We’re also calling for a reinvigoration of young people’s learning priorities and experiences as we transition through the stages of lockdown. We cannot just expect young people to ‘return to normal’. We need to be more creative in our responses – to listen to the needs of young people as they emerge from lockdown, to understand how to support them and re-engage them in effective ways. We see regular, embedded and targeted outdoor learning opportunities as a means of doing this. We also see this as a tipping point in the journey of outdoor education – it is time to think more deeply about how we make it accessible to *all* young people. We are committed to adopting adaptable and innovative approaches to how we reach and engage young people in order to pave the way for a more socially just and accessible outdoor learning environment in a post-pandemic world.



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