



APPG for Outdoor Learning

Outdoor Learning Access and Equity

Participation, barriers and opportunities



October 2026

The All Party Parliamentary Group for Outdoor Learning (APPG-OL)

The All Party Parliamentary Group for Outdoor Learning (APPG-OL) seeks to raise the profile of outdoor learning among policymakers and the wider public, positioning it not as a specialist educational activity but as a strategic response to wider societal challenges. By addressing inequalities in access to outdoor learning, the APPG-OL aims to ensure that more children, young people and adults can benefit from experiences that can lead to health and wellbeing, educational engagement, employability, civic participation and environmental responsibility.

The Secretariat of APPG-OL is provided by the Institute for Outdoor Learning (IOL), who researched and funded the survey and report with support from Dr Dave Harvey (lead author) and

- Association of Advisers for Outdoor Learning and Educational Visits
- Association of Heads of Outdoor Education Centres
- Council for Learning Outside the Classroom
- Liverpool John Moores University
- Natural England
- Nature Premium Campaign (Sector Specialist Group – Institute for Outdoor Learning)
- Outdoor Education Advisers Network
- UK Youth

Foreword

Outdoor learning is vital. It is vital to the educational, emotional and physical wellbeing of our young people. We know that too many young people don't get to access those opportunities and more than ever, we need to encourage young people to widen their horizons, build confidence and character, and nurture a love of learning.

But the evidence presented in this report clearly demonstrates that our principal challenge is no longer in demonstrating the value of outdoor learning. The challenge is ensuring that access to its benefits is consistently and equitably realised. It is a tragedy that so many children miss out on these experiences, and it is vital that we fully understand the barriers they face.



This report is a first. It brings together evidence from national participation datasets, programme evaluations, research literature and the APPG Outdoor Learning Access and Equity Survey. Together, the evidence provides one of the most comprehensive assessments to date of participation, barriers and equity in outdoor learning across England.

Its charge is that we must bring down the barriers to outdoor learning, so that every child can experience the joys of nature, growing in capability and confidence as they do so.

Tim Farron, MP

Chair of the All Party Parliamentary Group for Outdoor Learning

Executive Summary

Outdoor learning is widely recognised as an important contributor to children and young people's education, wellbeing, personal development and connection with the natural world. Government policy increasingly reflects this through support for enrichment, nature connection and personal development. However, while opportunities for outdoor learning exist across England, access to those opportunities is not equally distributed.

This report brings together evidence from national participation datasets, programme evaluations, research literature and the first APPG for Outdoor Learning Access and Equity Survey. Together, the evidence provides one of the most comprehensive assessments to date of participation, barriers and equity in outdoor learning across England.

The evidence shows that outdoor learning is widely valued but not consistently embedded. Participation is influenced less by demand from children, young people and families and more by the capacity of schools, youth settings and providers to deliver opportunities. The report concludes that the outdoor learning system is currently capacity-constrained rather than demand-constrained.

A consistent finding throughout the report is that participation becomes less equitable as provision becomes more resource-intensive. Opportunities in school grounds and local environments are relatively widespread and accessed, but the transition to residential experiences represents a key point at which participation declines.

Participation is not evenly distributed across the population. National datasets, programme evaluations and survey findings all indicate that children and young people facing socio-economic disadvantage, those with SEND and those attending settings with limited organisational capacity are more likely to miss out on outdoor learning opportunities. The evidence suggests that inequalities arise from the interaction of individual disadvantage and organisational constraints, creating patterns of cumulative disadvantage across the system.

The report identifies five dominant barriers limiting participation:

- Funding and affordability.
- Staffing capacity.
- Transport costs and availability.
- Organisational workload and competing priorities.
- Workforce confidence and capability.

These barriers rarely operate in isolation. Instead, they accumulate as provision becomes more ambitious and resource intensive. Whilst concerns relating to risk and safety remain relevant, practitioners responding to the APPG Survey consistently identified capacity, affordability and organisational constraints as more significant obstacles to participation.

Evidence from targeted programmes demonstrates that these barriers can be overcome. Initiatives such as Adventures Away from Home, Generation Green have successfully increased participation, particularly amongst groups identified as less likely to access outdoor learning.

However, the report also finds that many successful interventions remain short term, limiting their ability to create lasting and system-wide change.

The proposed Enrichment Framework creates an opportunity to strengthen access to outdoor learning through the ‘nature, outdoors and adventure’ strand. However, the report concludes that entitlement alone will not guarantee participation. Without sufficient delivery capacity within schools, youth settings, provider networks and local support systems, inequalities in access are likely to persist.

A notable finding from the APPG Survey is the near-total agreement among educational and youth settings that outdoor learning should be available to all children and young people. The evidence presented in this report therefore leads to a clear conclusion: the principal challenge is no longer demonstrating the value of outdoor learning. The challenge is ensuring that access to its benefits is consistently and equitably realised.

Conclusion

Outdoor learning can contribute to educational, personal and social development outcomes. It can also contribute to wider local authority priorities around youth justice, participation, and employability.

The evidence presented in this report convincingly demonstrates that the value of outdoor learning is widely recognised and that demand for participation exists across both the education and youth work sectors. Children and young people should not miss out on outdoor learning because of where they live, what they can afford, the capacity of their setting, or the complexity of the experience being offered. The principal challenge is therefore no longer one of demonstrating the value of outdoor learning but ensuring that access to its benefits is consistently and equitably realised. Achieving this requires sustained investment in workforce capacity, organisational support and participation infrastructure. The DfE, DCMS and Defra should therefore move beyond periodic programmes and short-term interventions, working towards a coordinated national strategy for high quality outdoor learning.

Key themes

1. Outdoor learning is valued but not consistently embedded.
2. Participation becomes less equitable as provision becomes more complex, especially at residential level.
3. Children and young people facing disadvantage and those with SEND are most likely to miss out.
4. The system is capacity-constrained rather than demand-constrained.
5. Funding, staffing, transport and organisational capacity are the dominant barriers.
6. There is strong support for outdoor learning as an entitlement.
7. Entitlement must be matched by delivery capacity.

Contents

The All Party Parliamentary Group for Outdoor Learning (APPG-OL)	1
Foreword	2
Executive Summary	3
Contents	5
1. Introduction	7
2. Context	9
2.1 What is ‘outdoor learning’?	9
2.2 Where does outdoor learning happen?	9
2.3 Outdoor learning and the curriculum	10
2.4 Demonstration projects	11
2.5 Policy context	11
2.6 The enrichment offer and Ofsted	13
2.7 Funded initiatives	13
3. Participation	15
3.1 Participation in school grounds and local environments	15
3.1.1 The Children’s People and Nature Survey (C-PaNS)	15
3.1.2 National Education Nature Park (NENP)	16
3.1.3 APPG Survey findings	16
3.1.4 Discussion	18
3.1.5 Section summary	19
3.2 Residential and overseas expeditions	19
3.2.1 Regional variation and system trends	19
3.2.2 Adventurous and overseas residential	20
3.2.3 Targeted interventions: AAFH and Generation Green 2	20
3.2.4 APPG Survey findings	21
3.2.5 Discussion	21
3.2.6 Section summary	22
3.3 Participation through curriculum and youth programmes	22
3.3.1 Curriculum participation	22
3.3.2 Youth participation	23
3.3.3 Duke of Edinburgh’s Award (DofE)	23
3.3.4 Combined Cadet Force (CCF) and wider cadet provision	24
3.3.5 APPG Survey findings	24
3.3.6 Discussion	25
3.3.7 Section summary	26
3.4 Characteristics associated with participation	26

3.4.1 Evidence from national datasets	26
3.4.2 APPG Survey findings	26
3.4.3 Discussion	27
3.4.4 Section summary	28
4. Barriers and enablers to participation	29
4.1 Systemic and policy factors	29
4.1.1 Legitimacy and educational status	29
4.1.2 APPG Survey findings	30
4.1.3 Discussion	30
4.1.4 Summary	31
4.2 Organisational and practitioner factors	31
4.2.1 Workforce capacity and competing priorities	32
4.2.2 APPG Survey findings	33
4.2.3 Discussion	35
4.2.4 Section summary	36
4.3 External factors	36
4.3.1 Socio-cultural and participant influences	36
4.3.2 APPG Survey findings	37
4.3.3 Discussion	39
4.3.4 Section summary	40
4.4 Access to spaces	40
4.4.1 Physical place and environmental constraints	40
4.4.2 APPG Survey findings	40
4.4.3 Discussion	41
4.4.4 Section summary	41
4.5 Enablers of participation	42
4.5.1 APPG Survey findings	42
4.5.2 Discussion	43
4.5.3 Section summary	44
5. Discussion	45
5.1 Barriers across the participation pathway	45
5.2 Cumulative disadvantage and non-participation	46
5.3 Capacity constraints and unmet demand	47
5.4 Implications	49
6. Conclusions	50
References	54

1. Introduction

The Government's proposed enrichment offerⁱ identifies five separate strands, including 'nature, outdoor and adventure' (NOA). Outdoor learning incorporates all of the NOA elements and is already widely recognised as a valuable approach to high quality enrichment. By supporting personal development, wellbeing, relationships, creativity and engagement with learning it also compliments and strengthens the other strands, contributing significantly to the holistic development of children and young people.

Through specific initiatives funded by the Department for Education (DfE), the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra), the Government's continuing support for school and youth focused programmes across England reflects its recognition of the value of outdoor learning. However, while outdoor learning is recognised within specific parts of the curriculum will feature in the forthcoming Natural History GCSE, it is largely non-statutory and locally determined. Despite extensive evidence of the personal, social and societal benefits¹, access to these outcomes remains uneven. Policy developments and funded initiatives demonstrate increasing support and potential for expansion, but access continues to depend on how provision is prioritised, resourced, and organised, and there is still an incomplete understanding of who benefits from outdoor learning, who is excluded, the barriers limiting participation and the actions needed to improve equitable access.



ⁱ [Government response to the Curriculum and Assessment Review](#). The other strands are sport and physical activities, civic engagement, arts and culture, and developing wider life skills.

Report development

This report draws on national and sector participation datasets, government policy initiatives, demonstration projects and targeted interventions to address this gap. While the data sets help identify patterns of participation and inequality, they provide less insight into the factors influencing access and the capacity of the system to respond. The evidence from the primary sources was therefore supported by findings from the first APPG-OL Access and Equity Survey, delivered over three weeks in September 2026.

The survey, designed in consultation with outdoor learning sector bodies and the DfE, targeted practitioners and leaders working in school and youth settings, providers of outdoor learning, and advisers and consultants supporting the development and delivery of outdoor learning. Specific question sets aimed to capture relevant perspectives:

- **Settings** – capturing delivery, participation and barriers within schools, youth organisations and other front-line settings
- **Provider** – capturing provision, demand, capacity, and constraints on delivery
- **Educational Visits Adviser (EVA) and consultant** – capturing system-level perspectives on how outdoor learning is interpreted, supported and constrained across the education system.

The survey was delivered over three weeks in September 2026. The findings, representing responses from 557 school and youth practitioners, outdoor learning providers, advisors and consultants, are used in this report to validate and refine findings from the wide datasets and literature rather than replace them. Response rates varied between the different respondent groups and should be understood as practitioner perceptions and indicative rather than as primary research (Table 1).

Respondent group	n	Survey pathway
School leader	94	Settings
Teacher / classroom assistant	104	
Educational visits coordinator	39	
Youth worker/youth organisation staff	45	
Outdoor learning provider (day visits)	102	Providers
Outdoor learning provider (residential)	105	
Outdoor learning provider (overseas)	8	
Educational visits adviser	20	Adviser
Educational consultant	40	
Total	557	

Table 1. Survey respondents by role

The combined findings enable analysis of how systemic, organisational and participant-level factors interact to shape opportunity and participation (Figure 1).



Figure 1. The report development process

2. Context

This first section sets out what we mean by ‘outdoor learning’ and where it takes place. It then introduces the programmes and policy initiatives that situate outdoor learning in contemporary policy and practice.

2.1 What is ‘outdoor learning’?

Outdoor learning involves the planned and progressive use of outdoor environments as contexts for experiential learning that enrich and support a young person’s personal, social, and educational development.

Outdoor learning is a term that covers various approaches to engaging with the outdoors for learning and development purposes. It can be interpreted in numerous ways depending on the context in which it is being used, but central to all definitions is the idea of planned and purposeful activity.

2.2 Where does outdoor learning happen?

Outdoor learning activities take place across a wide range of venues. School grounds are the most accessible venues and often the site for Forest School activity, gardening, some adventurous activity (for example, orienteering) and curriculum based activities linked to specific subjects. Further afield but usually within walking distance, the local area can provide access to parks, woodland, waterside and heritage sites that offer further opportunities for field work, curricular focused lessons and outdoor activities. Day visits often involve the use of transport to gain access to adventurous activity providers, natural environment venues or farms. Residential and expeditions provide opportunities for students to expand horizons, develop new skills and also to apply what they already know into new and challenging situations. Examples include visits to outdoor education and field study centres, the Duke of Edinburgh’s Award Scheme, and overseas expeditions (Figure 2).

The model should not be interpreted as a linear progression route through outdoor learning. Instead, it is intended to illustrate the different contexts and settings in which outdoor learning takes place and to provide a framework for considering patterns of participation, access and equity across them. While learners may move between these contexts in different ways over time, the model’s primary purpose is to highlight how opportunities, barriers and levels of participation vary across the outdoor learning landscape.

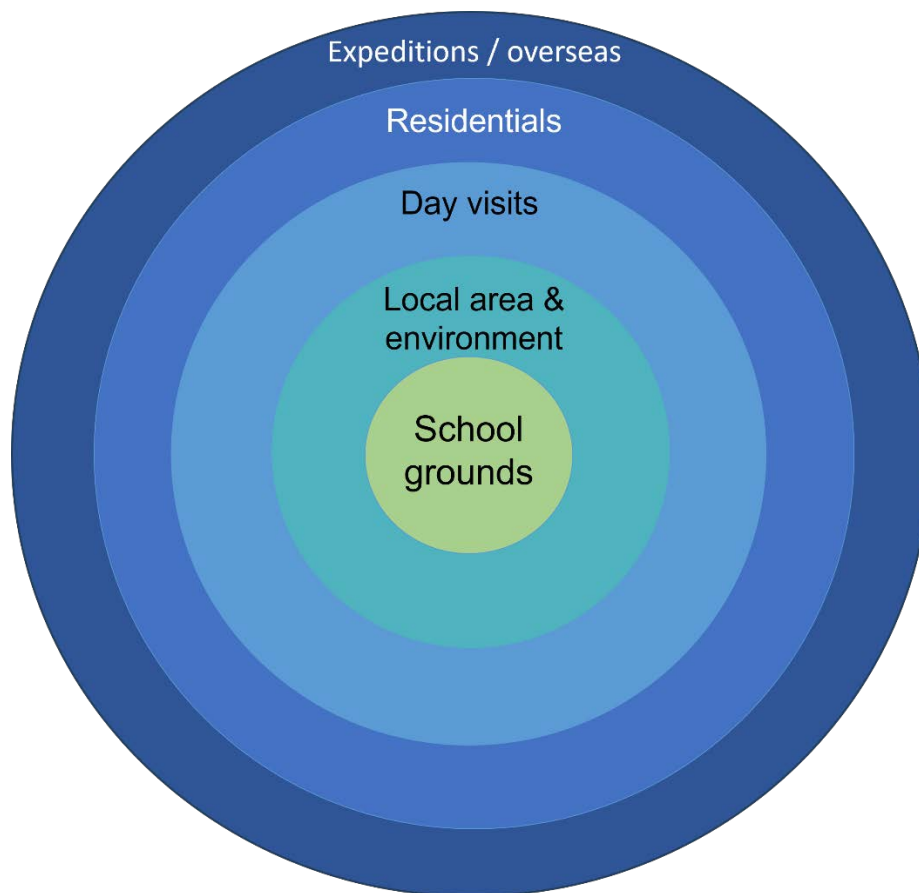


Figure 2. Five zones of outdoor learning (after Beames *et al.*, 2012)²

2.3 Outdoor learning and the curriculum

Outdoor learning occupies various positions in the English curriculum, reflecting the multiple interpretations of the term. The [Early Years Foundation Stage \(EYFS\)](#) states that ‘providers must provide access to an outdoor play area. If that is not possible, they must ensure that outdoor activities are planned and taken on a daily basis’. Beyond this statutory expectation, however, and with two key exceptions (outdoor and adventurous activities (OAA) in Physical Education (PE), and fieldwork in Geography), the [National Curriculum](#) (NC) does not make formal reference to outdoor learning.

Outdoor and Adventurous Activities is a compulsory component of the PE National Curriculum in England for Key Stages 2 and 3, requiring students to take part in physically and intellectually challenging activities that develop teamwork, problem-solving, and individual initiative, with opportunities to work both independently and collaboratively. At Key Stage 2, pupils must participate in outdoor and adventurous challenges individually and within a team, while at Key Stage 3 they should tackle more complex challenges that build trust, collaboration, and decision-making skills in increasingly demanding contexts. OAA is often delivered by external providers through day visits and residential.

Fieldwork is a compulsory element of the geography National Curriculum in England for Key Stages 1–3, forming an essential part of geographical learning by requiring pupils to collect, analyse, and draw conclusions from data gathered in real-world environments. At primary level

(KS1 and KS2), pupils use fieldwork to observe, measure, and record human and physical features in their school grounds and local area, while at Key Stage 3 they undertake fieldwork in contrasting locations to collect and analyse geographical data; at GCSE and A-level, fieldwork remains mandatory, with at least two fieldwork experiences required at GCSE and a minimum of four days at A-level.

The biology National Curriculum also makes reference to fieldwork skills. Although not compulsory at Key Stage 1-3, GCSE and A-level syllabi do require them to differing degrees.

Beyond the statutory requirements of the National Curriculum, adoption of Outdoor Learning is entirely at the discretion of the employer or individual school. Extracurricular and enrichment opportunities vary from school to school, influenced by a wide range of factors discussed in this report.

2.4 Demonstration projects

Over the past decade or so, the UK Government has funded two significant demonstration projects involving Outdoor Learning. Although producing considerable learning and convincing evidence, neither have thus far led to more formal recognition of Outdoor Learning approaches in the National Curriculum.

Natural Connections

The [Natural Connections Demonstration Project](#) (2012–2016) was a major £1 million+ project in South West England, funded by DEFRA, Natural England, and Historic England, to embed Learning in Natural Environments (LiNE) in schools. It demonstrated that local, tailored support increases teacher confidence and student engagement, particularly in disadvantaged areas. The project concluded that for outdoor learning to be sustainable, it must be integrated into school policies and practices rather than treated as a one-off activity.

Nature Friendly Schools

Nature Friendly Schools (NFS) was a UK-based initiative designed to improve children's mental health, wellbeing, and engagement with learning by transforming school grounds and providing regular, high-quality outdoor education, particularly in disadvantaged areas. Led by [The Wildlife Trusts](#), this project was funded by the [Department for Education](#) and Defra and demonstrated that structured, school-based outdoor learning in natural environments can measurably improve pupils' wellbeing, engagement, and broader developmental outcomes, while also building schools' long-term capacity to embed nature into everyday teaching and learning.

2.5 Policy context

Over the past decade, there has been a growing policy focus on strengthening connections between children, young people, and the natural environment. Successive government strategies have recognised the role of outdoor experiences in supporting wellbeing, engagement and broader educational outcomes.

Key national commitments include:

- The [Natural Environment White Paper \(2011\)](#) committed to removing barriers to learning outdoors and increasing schools' ability to deliver outdoor education.
- The [25 Year Environment Plan](#) emphasised promoting health and wellbeing through the natural environment and encouraging children to be closer to nature, with a particular focus on disadvantaged areas.
- The [Environmental Improvement Plan \(2025\)](#) reinforced this direction, including a commitment to ensure that learning in and about nature is available across all stages of education, and to reduce barriers to access while strengthening children's connection to the natural world.
- The [Education Estates Strategy \(2026\)](#) sets out a 10-year plan to improve school and college environments so that they better support opportunity, wellbeing, and learning. The strategy acknowledges the value of outdoor learning and commits to improving access to nature for children and young people.

In addition, the Outdoor Education Advisers' Panel (OEAP) [National Guidance for the management of high-quality outdoor learning, educational visits and adventurous activities](#) provides a nationally recognised framework to support the safe and effective delivery of provision. Developed at the request of government and referenced in Department for Education and Health and Safety Executive guidance, it offers detailed, regularly updated advice covering planning, risk management, and good practice across a wide range of outdoor learning contexts.

Effective delivery also relies on mechanisms that support delivery and ensure public confidence in what is being delivered. Statutory inspection of adventure activities under the [adventure activity licensing scheme](#) and quality assurance mechanisms such as the Learning Outside the Classroom (LOtC) [Quality Badge](#) support delivery by providing independent assessment of third-party provision against nationally agreed standards. Established in response to risks identified by the Education Select Committee, the LOtC Quality Badge can be used by schools, their employers and community organisations across the UK. It applies consistent criteria across all LOtC sectors, covering both risk management (including safeguarding) and the quality of the learning offer. While participation is voluntary and not universal, the scheme demonstrates the UK's leadership in this area, providing a robust, single framework for promoting consistency and raising standards across all types of LOtC provision, including outdoor learning.

More widely, recent policy developments across education, health, and the environment reinforce this direction through a wider focus on wellbeing, inclusion, and place-based approaches. Government guidance promotes whole-setting approaches to children and young people's mental health, supported by senior mental health leads and expanding Mental Health Support Teams. At the same time, reforms to the SEND and alternative provision system emphasise more consistent, integrated support across education, health, and care. Sustainability policy within education has introduced requirements for climate action planning and leadership in all settings, alongside a broader commitment to increasing connection with nature through the education estate. These developments sit within a wider emphasis on local access to nature, including the ambition for all households to be within a 15-minute walk of

green or blue space, and a growing focus on joining up services and data across sectors to support prevention, early intervention, and improved outcomes for children and young people.

These policies indicate a clear trajectory towards increasing access to outdoor learning and embedding it more consistently within education and youth provision. This report builds on that direction by examining how access is currently distributed and what factors shape participation across the system.

2.6 The enrichment offer and Ofsted

From September 2027, schools in England will be required to provide evidence that they are delivering a broad enrichment offer to all their students. Enrichment activity, including ‘nature, outdoors and adventure’, will be assessed by Ofsted against a set of benchmarks under personal development.³

2.7 Funded initiatives

The government has supported a range of delivery initiatives, including the [National Education Nature Park](#) (NENP), [Generation Green](#), and [Adventures Away from Home \(AAfH\)](#), which demonstrate the potential to expand participation and improve outcomes when provision is supported.

National Education Nature Park

The NENP is a Department for Education-funded initiative in England launched in 2023 to transform school, nursery, and college grounds into a nationwide network of wildlife-rich spaces. Its primary aim is to empower young people to tackle climate change and biodiversity loss through hands-on improvements like planting, building and monitoring biodiversity on their sites

Generation Green 2

Generation Green was a national programme delivered through the Access Unlimited partnership in 2021/22 and 2024/25, aimed at connecting children and young people with the natural environment and rural life. Through a range of day visit and residential opportunities, Generation Green 2 (2024/25) aimed to develop awareness and connection with the natural environment and rural life, fostering wellbeing and environmental stewardship.

Adventures Away from Home (AAfH)

AAfH was a UK government-funded initiative, coordinated by [UK Youth](#), providing fully funded outdoor learning opportunities to young people in England who face barriers to participation. It aimed to foster independence and emotional development through outdoor activities, with a focus on supporting underserved communities. Alongside expanding participation, the programme also increasingly focused on outcomes related to wellbeing, reflecting the broader role of outdoor learning in supporting young people’s development beyond academic attainment.

Other Government funding

The Government has also provided targeted funding to the Duke of Edinburgh's Award Scheme, and directly funds the Army, Air, Sea and Combined Cadet Forces which offer OL opportunities as part of a wider programme.

Local government initiatives

In many areas, targeted intervention programmes, subsidised residentials, transport support and strategic outdoor learning initiatives have successfully increased participation amongst children and young people facing disadvantage.⁴ Valuable learning can be drawn from these place-based approaches alongside national programmes.



3. Participation

Introduction

This chapter examines available evidence relating to participation in outdoor learning across England. It draws on national participation datasets, programme evaluations and findings from the APPG Survey to explore participation across different forms of provision.

3.1 Participation in school grounds and local environments

The breadth of outdoor learning opportunities available to schools makes assessing participation rates difficult. Although there is no single source that reflects the whole sector, two data sources help to give an indication of participation in outdoor learning in school grounds and the immediate local area.

3.1.1 The Children's People and Nature Survey (C-PaNS)

C-PaNS is one of the main national datasets used to understand children's access to outdoor learning and nature in England. It provides a self-reported, population-level baseline, using frequency-based measures (e.g. regular, occasional, and "never" participation) to capture both the extent and consistency of access. The questions are based on access to the natural environment.

Outdoor lessons

C-PaNS data indicates that participation in outdoor lessons varies considerably. While some children report frequent participation, a substantial proportion report no participation at all. Differences are visible across age groups, regions and socio-economic groups.

Findings from the C-PaNS survey⁵ show that

- In 2025, only 35% of pupils report experiencing outdoor lessons beyond PE frequently (every/most days), while 27% report never participating.
- Pupils living in rural areas are more likely to miss out entirely, with 41% reporting "never" compared with 32% in urban areas.
- Regional variations are also evident. In London, 45% of children and young people report experiencing lessons outside every or most days (18% never). In the East Midlands, this figure falls to 25% for regular participation and 38% never.

Over the five years of data collection from 2021-2025, participation appears to become more polarised with age, with older pupils more likely to have none at all (36%, 12-15 year olds vs 28% 8-11 year olds). Gender differences are minimal, while patterns by ethnicity are uneven and likely shaped by local context. Children and young people with disabilities are more likely than those without to experience outdoor lessons every or most days (41% vs 29%).

Visits to natural environments

C-PaNs data⁶ shows that

- 60% of children visit natural places with school at least every term, but 10% never do so.
- Income is the strongest driver of inequality:
 - 65% of pupils from higher-income (£50,000+) households participate at least once a term. Only 13% from the lowest income bracket (up to £15,000) do so.
 - 27% of lower-income pupils report never participating.
- Older pupils (aged 12–15) are more than twice as likely to say they never go (14% vs 6%) than younger pupils (aged 8–11).
- Regional participation differences are evident: 79% of learners in London, for example, visit the countryside at least once a term, compared with 51% in the East Midlands.
- Ethnicity patterns are uneven, with variation potentially reflecting local or school-level factors rather than consistent national trends.

The role of school in accessing the natural environment appears to be critical: 28% said that they spent most of their time in nature at school, with an additional 38% saying it was evenly spread between in school and out of school.⁷

3.1.2 National Education Nature Park (NENP)

Alongside this baseline picture, NENP represents a recent attempt to expand access through school-based provision.

Launched in 2023, NENP aims to embed nature-based learning within education settings. Participation is increasing but remains at an early stage of adoption: registration has risen from 5.5% of eligible settings in 2023/24 to 14% in 2024/25.⁸ To date, over 10,000 schools, nurseries, and colleges have registered.⁹

The programme has provided over £12 million in funding to 1,250 eligible settings, with a further £3 million available to support an additional 1000 settings.ⁱⁱ Engagement is evidenced through activity, with around 1100 registered sites actively developing habitat maps, a core programme component involving pupil participation. Whether this is all pupils in each setting or regular engagement, however, is not known.

3.1.3 APPG Survey findings

The survey findings broadly support and develop the evidence from the participation datasets, survey responses suggesting that outdoor learning is widely present in the represented settings, albeit differently applied across the five zones of the participation model. (Table 2)

ⁱⁱ Funding is available for settings in areas of deprivation for purchasing equipment and improving biodiversity. [National Education Nature Park: 2025 to 2026 academic year funding criteria guidance](#)

	OL in school grounds	OL in the local area	Off-site visits (local environment)	Adventurous activities on-site	Adventurous activities off-site	Residentials	Overseas outdoor/ expeditions
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Primary schools	80	56	68	5	47	85	0
Secondary schools	93	79	96	29	86	93	68
Special / alternative provision schools	78	74	78	26	70	87	17
Youth settings	6	34	49	23	74	57	23

Table 2. Where outdoor learning happens

Most maintained primary and secondary schools represented in the survey deliver outdoor learning periodically rather than as a regular weekly aspect of the curriculum. Special schools on the other hand were much more likely to report OL delivery as an integrated part of the school day (Table 3).

	Integrated daily or weekly	Delivered periodically (e.g. termly or several times a year	Delivered occasionally (e.g. annually or one-off activities)	Delivered rarely	Not delivered
	%	%	%	%	%
Primary schools	33	55	7	4	1
Secondary schools	36	54	7	4	0
Special / alternative provision	91	4	4	0	0
Youth settings	17	57	23	0	3

Note: Percentages are rounded to the nearest whole number and may not sum to 100%.

Table 3. Frequency of delivery

Outdoor learning opportunities in many settings were reported as being available to all. Maintained primary schools, special schools and alternative provision settings were most likely to report broad participation for almost all or most children and young people. Youth settings have the highest reported limited access, with opportunities only being available to small, targeted groups.

Despite the wide range of activity reported, there was a strong consensus amongst settings that current provision is less than they would like to offer. 61% per cent of settings consider current provision to be moderately or significantly below what they believe they should ideally provide, while 67% report that desire for outdoor learning exceeds current delivery, suggesting unmet demand. A setting can be only slightly below its ideal operating level but still experience demand for more, or, conversely, be substantially below its ideal while demand appears matched, e.g. because cost or access barriers suppress participation.

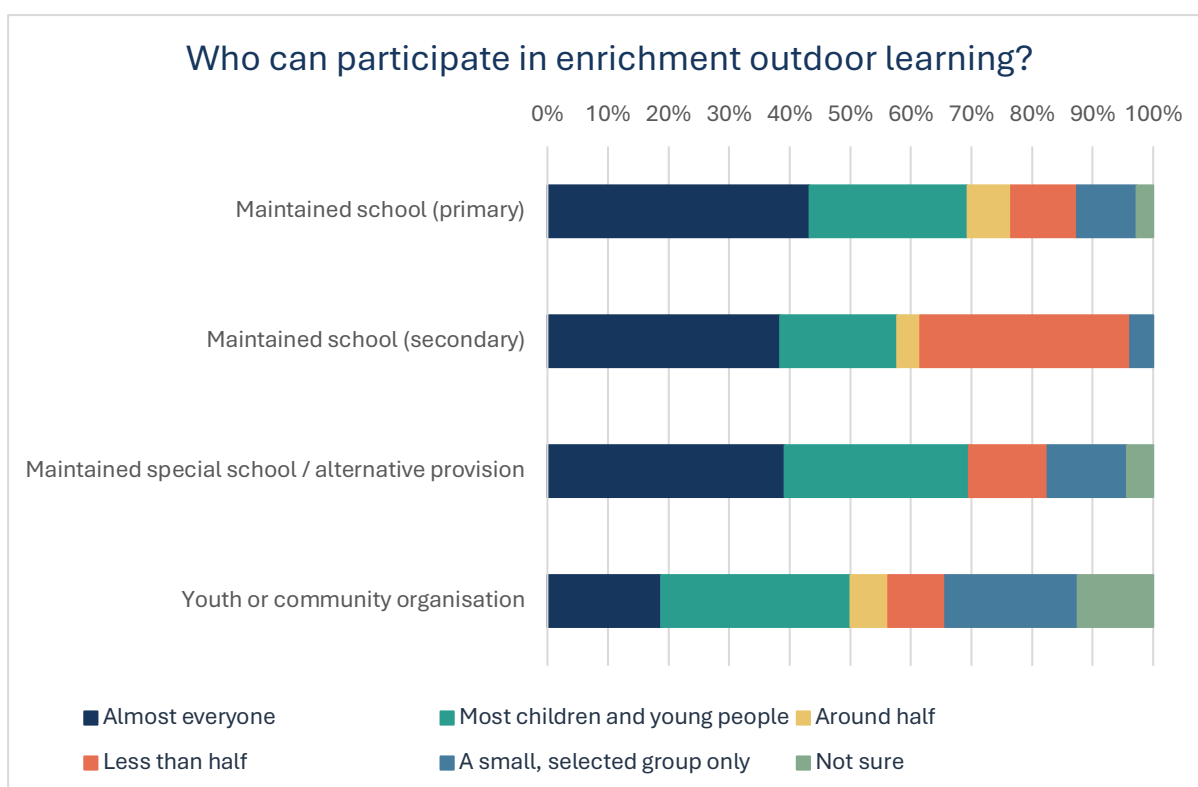


Figure 3. Who participates in outdoor learning?

Despite the apparently high percentages of broad participation, a significant proportion of settings only offer outdoor learning to less than half of learners or fewer. In primary schools this figure is 21%; in secondary schools it is 39%, indicating that access across the system is far from even. Youth and community organisations reported the most pronounced participation inequalities, with fewer respondents describing access as broadly universal and higher proportions identifying particular groups as likely to miss out (Figure 3).

3.1.4 Discussion

The available evidence shows a consistent picture of outdoor learning in school grounds and local environments. It appears to be present across the majority of educational settings, but levels of participation vary considerably in terms of what is offered, frequency and regularity of provision.

Data from C-PaNS identifies a substantial group of children and young people who report little or no participation in outdoor lessons or visits to the natural environment, with age, geography and socio economic status all appearing to be contributory factors. The APPG Survey findings broadly support this picture, with only around one third of responding maintained primary and secondary schools reporting that outdoor learning is integrated into the school week on a daily or weekly basis. In contrast, special schools and alternative provision settings represented in the survey reported substantially higher levels of regular participation.

Evidence relating to visits to the natural environment, captured through C-PaNS and the APPG Survey (see Table 2), suggests that participation is wide spread. Compared with regular outdoor

lessons, visits appear to be more commonly associated with occasional participation, indicating that opportunities for outdoor learning occur through a mix of regular school based activity and less frequent off-site visits.

Findings from the 2023 WWF Nature for Schools survey¹⁰ provide further context. Although outdoor learning was reported to be present in many only 27% reported it as embedded into the curriculum for all pupils. The same survey found that outdoor learning was not part of the curriculum at all in over a third of schools. Three quarters of schools did not provide daily nature experiences for all pupils, suggesting that regular engagement with outdoor environments remains less common than occasional participation.

The NENP represents a recent attempt to extend access through school-based provision. Registration data demonstrates growing engagement among schools, nurseries and colleges, although participation still reflects a relatively small proportion of eligible settings. Implementation remains at an early stage, however, and it is not yet possible to assess its impact on participation patterns.

The data explored here suggests widespread use of school grounds and visits to the natural environment. However, participation varies across different groups of children and young people, and regular participation cannot currently be assumed to be universal.

3.1.5 Section summary

- Evidence from national datasets and the APPG Survey suggests that outdoor learning in school grounds and local environments is widespread but not consistently offered or accessed across all settings
- Differences in participation are evident across socio-economic status, geography, age, and additional need. Visits to local environments are more widely accessed than regular outdoor lessons, but show greater variation across income groups
- Compared with other forms of outdoor learning examined later in this report, school grounds and local environments appear to provide the broadest participation base within the current system

3.2 Residential and overseas expeditions

Residential and overseas expeditions represent the highest level of inequality within the outdoor learning system, involving increased cost, logistical complexity and organisational capacity. As a result, they provide insight into how differences in participation vary as higher levels of provision become more resource-intensive. Overseas visits add additional layers of complexity.

3.2.1 Regional variation and system trends

The Council for Learning Outside the Classroom's *Different Journeys*¹¹ report shows that residential provision is declining overall, with reductions in the number of visits, participation, and visit length. There are clear regional disparities, with the South reporting higher levels of

provision, participation and visit length, and the North consistently recording lower levels across all measures. These differences align closely with socio-economic indicators, particularly Free School Meal (FSM) eligibility (Figure 4). Residentialials are offered less frequently in more disadvantaged areas, and participation levels are systematically lower in those areas.

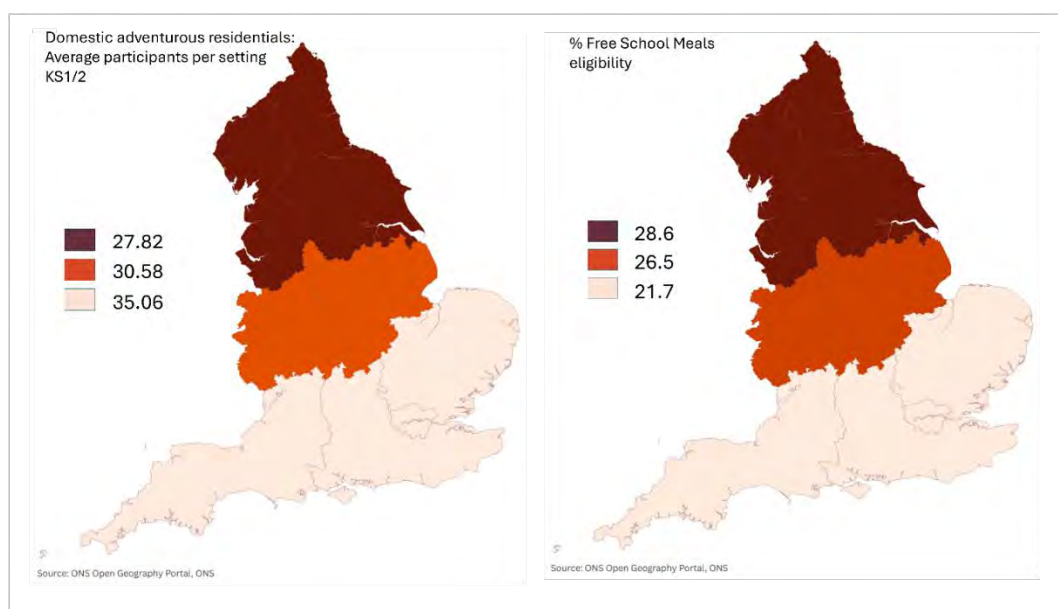


Figure 4. Gradient map of average regional participation in domestic adventurous residentialials compared to FSM eligibility (Image credit: CLOtC, 2025)¹²

3.2.2 Adventurous and overseas residentialials

The *Different Journeys* report shows that adventurous residentialials display the strongest and most consistent regional differences, with higher participation and opportunity in the South. Participation in adventurous residentialials has remained relatively stable post-Covid, although visit length has reduced. These experiences are often framed as personal development or enrichment activities.

Overseas provision is mostly a specialist secondary stage offer. Overseas residentialials show even greater regional disparities, with participation and visits per setting in the South almost double those in the North¹³. Contributing factors include higher costs (travel and accommodation, geographic advantages (e.g. proximity to ports), and reliance on parental contributions.

3.2.3 Targeted interventions: AAFH and Generation Green 2

AAFH and Generation Green 2 evaluations provide insight into participation from leaders and young people.

In 2025, the AAFH programme reached nearly 10,000 young people across England using 69 providers. Participation was strongly targeted toward under-represented groups, with approximately 87% experiencing at least one barrier to participation and over half experiencing

multiple, overlapping barriers.ⁱⁱⁱ A significant proportion of participants had not engaged in outdoor learning in the previous two years. Demand significantly exceeded supply, and in the final round that ran from October 2025 - April 2026 an additional 31,160 places were filled by young people attended a mixture of day visits, one and two-night residentials. AAfH has reached a total of 60,000 young people over its four-year lifespan.¹⁴

A similar pattern is evident in Generation Green 2, a national programme that supported over 26,000 young people from some of the most socially disadvantaged areas in England to take part in outdoor learning experiences in protected landscapes, many of whom would otherwise not have had the opportunity. Participants were young people from geographic locations in England falling into the Index of Multiple Deprivation scale (1-3) and schools where at least 30% of pupils are eligible for Pupil Premium funding. Nearly half of all participating groups surveyed that took part in Generation Green 2 had a higher-than-average proportion of young people from minority ethnic / global majority backgrounds (over 20%).¹⁵

Evaluation data indicates that participation increased substantially where financial and organisational barriers were removed. Around 80% of participants were unlikely or very unlikely to have accessed similar experiences without support. Evidence from the programme also highlights constraints on delivery, with overall reach shaped by the scale and duration of funding rather than a lack of interest or engagement.¹⁶

3.2.4 APPG Survey findings

APPG Survey data shows outdoor learning residentials are offered by 82% of maintained schools and youth settings who responded to the survey (Table 2). Extended or expedition based experiences, including overseas visits, were offered by 68% of responding secondary schools.

That participation becomes more challenging as provision becomes more complex is supported through the survey data. Residential experiences are identified by 37% of maintained and youth settings, and 47% of advisers as the stage where participation is most likely to decline. Respondents linked reduced participation to affordability, transport costs, staffing requirements and participant confidence. Advisers monitor visit planning and are ideally situated to gather insight into overall trends. They suggest that residential costs have increased, while visit length, frequency and participation have reduced.

3.2.5 Discussion

Residential participation varies across England, with differences evident by region and socio-economic context. Participation appears less evenly distributed than in school grounds and local environment provision.

ⁱⁱⁱ Barriers included disability or additional needs, low academic attainment, caring responsibilities, care experience, and language barriers.

The *Different Journeys* analysis identifies variation in residential participation across England, with differences evident in participation rates, visit frequency and visit duration. These patterns are particularly pronounced in adventurous and overseas residential provision where regional differences appear to play a significant role. Survey evidence and programme evaluations similarly indicate that participation is not uniform across the population.

Evidence from Adventures Away from Home (AAfH) and Generation Green demonstrates that substantial participation can be achieved among groups identified as being less likely to access comparable opportunities. Both programmes reached large numbers of children and young people who met eligibility criteria linked to disadvantage, under-representation or barriers to participation. Evaluation findings suggest that many participants would have been unlikely to access similar experiences in the absence of programme support.

The APPG Survey findings broadly align with these wider datasets. Respondents reported delivery of adventurous residentials and overseas provision across many settings but also identified residential experiences as the stage at which participation is most likely to decline. This perception was shared across settings, providers and advisers, suggesting a degree of consistency in how participation patterns are understood across different parts of the sector.

Overall, participation appears to become more variable as provision extends beyond school grounds and local environments into residential and expeditionary experiences.

3.2.6 Section summary

- Outdoor learning based residentials are widely offered across educational settings in England. Overseas experiences are most commonly associated with secondary phase provision and less widely offered.
- Programme evaluations and research linked to national datasets identify differences in participation between regions, settings and groups of learners.
- APPG Survey respondents most frequently identified residential experiences as the stage at which participation is most likely to decline.

3.3 Participation through curriculum and youth programmes

Additional participation data from curriculum subjects and youth programmes provides further insight into how access to outdoor learning varies beyond direct school-led provision. These sources help to contextualise participation patterns and highlight how engagement does not necessarily translate into equitable access to outdoor learning experiences.

3.3.1 Curriculum participation

Geography and biology

Geography is statutory at Key Stage 2 and 3, and remains a high-participation subject at GCSE, with 302,706 entries in 2025 ranking it among the top ten subjects nationally.¹⁷ Participation has increased since 2019, indicating sustained or growing engagement yet there is a gender imbalance (54% male, 46% female), alongside attainment differences. Participation has

broadened to include more pupils facing disadvantage and those with lower prior attainment. In contrast, there were 183,539 GCSE biology entries in 2025, a decrease of 5.8%.¹⁸

Despite its popularity and potential for outdoor focused activity, fieldwork is often underdeveloped across all phases of education. Provision is frequently reduced to the minimum required by exam specifications, with cost, transport, and time pressures limiting access to meaningful outdoor experiences.¹⁹

Outdoor and Adventurous Activities (OAA)

OAA is a statutory part of the PE curriculum at Key Stage 2 and 3. Provision ranges from low-complexity activities (e.g. orienteering, team-building) to higher-risk activities (e.g. climbing, canoeing). Delivery is constrained by staff competence, equipment availability, and logistical requirements, particularly where external providers are needed for more adventurous activities.²⁰

Although participation data for OAA does not currently exist, visit management systems used by many schools and employers have the potential to link to school management information systems and to record participation data. Usage of these systems is currently highly variable across England, however, resulting in inconsistent reporting.

3.3.2 Youth participation

The [Youth Participation Survey \(YPS\)](#) carried out in 2023 provides a national picture of engagement in out-of-school activities. Although not specifically aimed at outdoor learning experiences, the survey data supports understanding access to residential activities.

The YPS showed the critical importance of educational settings for enabling access to residential activities: 40% of young people participated in a residential, with 75% of those being organised through school or college.

Participation in residential activities varies significantly:

- Higher among younger pupils (54% aged 10–12 vs 27% aged 16–19)
- Lower among Free School Meal pupils (36% vs 43% non-FSM)
- Strong variation by region (26% in the North East to 50% in the South West)
- Participation is lowest in the most deprived areas (32–33%), and highest in the least deprived (47–50%)

3.3.3 Duke of Edinburgh's Award (DofE)

The DofE award is a voluntary participation programme focused on personal development. For many, the expedition section provides a key access point to OL activity. Participation is substantial, with 30.9% of all 14-year-olds in the UK starting the Bronze Award in 2025. However, participation is uneven relative to national demographics:

- 14.9% from low-income backgrounds (vs approximately 27% nationally)²¹
- 27.7% from minority ethnic groups (vs 38% nationally)²²
- 9.3% with additional needs (vs approximately 20% nationally)²³

3.3.4 Combined Cadet Force (CCF) and wider cadet provision

The Combined Cadet Force (CCF) is a school-based youth programme delivered in partnership with the Ministry of Defence. It provides structured opportunities for young people to engage in a range of activities, including fieldcraft, adventure training, and leadership development, within an experiential and team-based framework.

Participation is substantial, with approximately 48,240 cadets in the Combined Cadet Force as of April 2026, supported by around 4,540 adult volunteers.²⁴ The programme is delivered through school-based contingents, with provision increasingly present across the state sector as well as independent schools.

The CCF sits alongside a wider set of Ministry of Defence-sponsored cadet forces, including the Sea Cadet Corps, Army Cadet Force, Air Training Corps, and Volunteer Cadet Corps. These community-based programmes extend access beyond the school setting, with a further 88,870 cadets participating in these groups as of April 2026.²⁵ Together, these programmes represent a significant component of the youth landscape associated with outdoor, residential and experiential learning.

3.3.5 APPG Survey findings

The APPG Survey showed that 54% of maintained primary school respondents delivered outdoor learning explicitly linked to the curriculum (Table 2). This figure rises to 71% of secondary school respondents, suggesting strong subject linkage but falls to 14% for youth and community practitioners. This latter group described a distinctive participation model that places less emphasis on curriculum delivery and more on sustained engagement, inclusion and relationship based approaches that incorporate mostly periodic outdoor learning provision.

Survey responses also shed light on the provision of adventurous activity delivery, part of the National Curriculum for PE. Only 5% of primary schools who responded said they delivered these on site, and 47% offered them off-site. Over 70% of secondary schools, youth settings, special schools and alternative provision stated that they provided off-site adventurous activity delivery (Table 2).

Although there is no dataset that explicitly focuses on youth participation in outdoor learning the APPG Survey goes some way to addressing this. Survey data from respondents based in youth and community settings shows that 74% of young people can experience adventurous outdoor activities, 49% visits to the natural environment, and 57% have opportunities to go on residential. Provision is equally split between universal access for all young people, specific age groups, optional enrichment and targeted programmes for specific demographics or identified need. However, outdoor learning is only delivered regularly in 17% of youth settings, the majority of delivery (57%) happening periodically. Almost 90% of activity relies to some degree on external providers.

3.3.6 Discussion

The evidence reviewed in this section indicates that curriculum subjects and youth programmes provide substantial opportunities for engagement in activities associated with outdoor learning. Geography remains one of the most widely studied GCSE subjects, while youth organisations, the Duke of Edinburgh's Award and cadet forces collectively involve large numbers of young people. These programmes represent significant pathways through which young people may encounter outdoor, residential and experiential learning opportunities.

However, participation in a subject or programme does not necessarily equate to participation in outdoor learning itself. GCSE Geography, for example, demonstrates that while large numbers of pupils engage with the subject voluntarily at GCSE, access to its core experiential component - fieldwork - is uneven and often constrained, a pattern that is also evident at Key Stage 2 and 3.²⁶ This suggests a critical gap where subjects that have high potential for outdoor learning can achieve strong uptake but still fail to provide equitable experiential opportunities. As a result, disadvantaged pupils, although increasingly represented within the subject at GCSE, are less likely to access the most powerful forms of learning associated with it.

Outdoor and Adventurous Activity provision in the PE curriculum further illustrates how curriculum entitlement does not necessarily ensure consistent access. Although it is a statutory requirement, the nature and quality of provision vary widely between schools.²⁷ This results in a baseline level of participation being achieved, but significant variation in depth and quality. More adventurous activities (with the potentially greater impact) are more likely to be externally delivered (at additional cost), resource-intensive and consequently unevenly distributed, especially so when achieved through a residential. This reinforces the broader pattern that increasing complexity leads to increasing inequality, even within curriculum frameworks.

Youth participation data reinforces findings from C-PaNS and residential analysis, showing that participation in outdoor and residential experiences is widespread but uneven, with age, socio-economic status, and geography key determinants of access. Participation declines with age and disadvantage, suggesting that participation is not sustained across the educational journey, and that inequalities widen as learners progress.

DofE demonstrates that large-scale programmes can achieve broad participation but still struggle to achieve equitable representation. Despite targeted efforts to remove barriers, both by the organisation itself and with government support²⁸, disadvantaged groups remain under-represented, indicating that programme-level interventions alone are insufficient to fully overcome structural inequalities.

The APPG Survey further highlights differences between educational and youth provision. Whilst schools more commonly link outdoor learning to curriculum delivery, youth organisations tend to describe participation in terms of personal development, relationship-building and inclusion.

The evidence suggests that curriculum subjects and youth programmes provide important routes into outdoor learning participation. However, participation levels alone provide only a partial picture of access, as they do not necessarily indicate the frequency, depth or consistency of outdoor learning experiences across different groups of children and young people.

3.3.7 Section summary

- Participation in curriculum subjects and youth programmes associated with outdoor learning is substantial, with high levels of engagement across GCSE Geography, the Duke of Edinburgh's Award and cadet forces.
 - Whilst fieldwork, outdoor and adventurous activities expeditions and residentials may form part of provision, participation data offers limited insight into the extent, frequency or quality of those experiences.
 - The available evidence suggests that participation is influenced by age, socio-economic circumstances, geography and learner characteristics, suggesting that access to opportunities is not evenly distributed across all groups.
-

3.4 Characteristics associated with participation

The previous sections have shown how participation varies across different forms of provision and between groups of children and young people. While there are variations in the measures and definitions used, similar patterns emerge across national datasets, programme evaluations and survey data.

3.4.1 Evidence from national datasets.

Several datasets identify differences in participation associated with age, socio-economic circumstance and geography. C-PaNS data indicates variation in participation in both outdoor lessons and visits to natural environments, with lower participation reported amongst older children and young people and those from lower-income households. Regional differences are also evident.

Similar patterns appear within the Youth Participation Survey, where participation in residential experiences varies according to age, eligibility for Free School Meals, deprivation and geographic location. Participation is highest amongst younger age groups and in less deprived areas.

Participation data from the Duke of Edinburgh's Award also suggests that participation does not fully reflect the demographic profile of the wider population. Young people from lower-income backgrounds, minority ethnic groups and those with additional needs are represented at lower levels than might be expected from national demographic data.

Taken together, these datasets suggest that participation in outdoor learning and outdoor learning-related programmes is not distributed evenly across the population.

3.4.2 APPG Survey findings

The APPG Survey sought to explore whether the patterns of inequality identified in the datasets matched those seen in practice. All respondent groups broadly agreed that outdoor learning is not provided or accessed equally.

Where outdoor learning was delivered, children and young people facing disadvantage and those with SEND were most frequently identified as being at increased risk of reduced participation. Rural and geographically isolated communities, some cultural and community

groups and older children and young people were also identified as likely to experience lower levels of participation. Survey responses also highlighted wider organisational factors. Settings with limited staffing capacity and financial resources were identified as the two most dominant factors affecting participation.

Many educational settings reported that access within their own organisation was broadly equitable, yet providers and advisers were more likely to identify recurring patterns of unequal participation linked to disadvantage, additional need, organisational capacity and geographic location. This suggests that inequalities may be more visible from a system-wide perspective than from within individual organisations. Youth and community organisations were particularly likely to identify disadvantage and SEND as factors associated with reduced participation.

Figure 5 combines the responses from the various role perspectives and highlights a fundamental truth: if the setting is not delivering outdoor learning due to limited staffing capacity, nobody benefits.

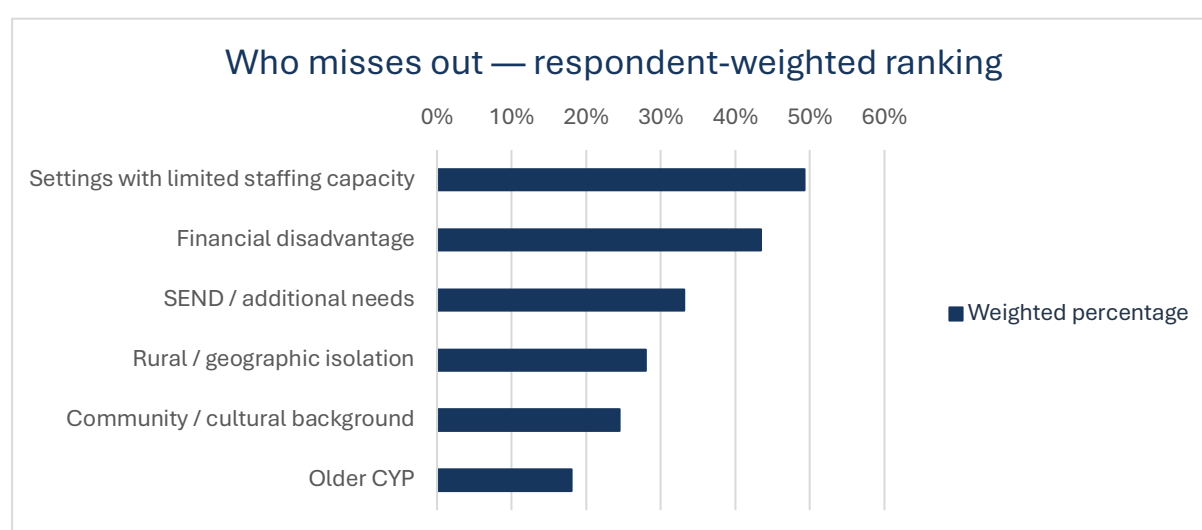


Figure 5. Who misses out?

3.4.3 Discussion

Participation datasets and the APPG survey all point towards a consistent picture of unequal access. Whilst participation in outdoor learning is widespread, opportunities are not distributed evenly and some groups remain significantly less likely to participate than others. National participation datasets, programme evaluations and survey findings all identify variation associated with socio-economic circumstance, age and geography. Survey respondents additionally draw attention to SEND and organisational capacity as characteristics associated with participation levels.

Although no dataset is able to identify a single group of children and young people who consistently participate or do not participate across all forms of outdoor learning, the evidence suggests that participation varies systematically rather than randomly, with some groups appearing more likely than others to encounter reduced opportunities for engagement. Financial, organisational and socio-cultural factors also appear to intersect to prevent intended participation from being realised.

Evidence from the WWF Nature for Schools survey suggests that outdoor learning participation is frequently organised through school trips, awards and extracurricular provision, further reinforcing the Youth Participation Survey finding that identified the role educational settings appear to play in enabling access to structured outdoor experiences, especially residentials, with schools and colleges acting as the primary organisers of many opportunities. While these activities can provide valuable experiences, participation is often limited to a minority of pupils, reinforcing wider evidence that access to outdoor learning opportunities is unevenly distributed and corroborated through the APPG Survey.

3.4.4 Section summary

- Variation in participation is evident across socio-economic status, geography, age, and additional need, and occurs across both curriculum-based and extracurricular provision.
- The most prevalent constraint on participation identified across all APPG Survey respondent groups is staffing capacity. If outdoor learning experiences are not being delivered then all groups, irrespective of additional factors, miss out.



4. Barriers and enablers to participation

Building on the patterns identified in previous sections, this section examines the barriers that shape access to outdoor learning across the system. As with participation, these barriers operate across systemic, organisational, and participant levels, influencing whether opportunities are created, sustained, and accessed. They often act in combination, becoming more significant as provision becomes more complex and resource-intensive.

Importantly, barriers do not act in isolation. Instead, they accumulate across the participation pathway, intensifying as provision becomes more complex, costly, and logistically demanding.

Research into the barriers and enablers influencing access to outdoor learning is comprehensive and well understood, with multiple sources reporting similar factors.

4.1 Systemic and policy factors

The most pervasive barriers are structural, arising from the interaction between policy, accountability systems and prevailing conceptions of education.

The performance imperative remains a dominant constraint. High-stakes accountability frameworks prioritise measurable attainment in core subjects, reducing the perceived space for outdoor learning approaches that emphasise personal development, socialisation, and experiential learning.^{29 30 31}

Closely linked to this is the challenge of evidencing impact. Outdoor learning often produces outcomes that are experiential, relational or developmental in nature, making them harder to capture through conventional written or quantitative formats. This creates a structural disincentive for schools operating within tightly defined accountability systems.³²

More broadly, the framing of learning within the system limits the extent to which broader educational purposes can be legitimised. Outdoor learning, when positioned outside this framework, is more likely to be seen as an addition rather than an integral delivery approach.³³

4.1.1 Legitimacy and educational status

Practitioners also perceive a lack of value for outdoor learning from education inspectorates like Ofsted. While government initiatives may encourage outdoor learning approaches, actual inspection processes are seen to prioritise narrow academic achievement over the wider benefits of nature exposure, and the proposed enrichment entitlement and associated Ofsted inspection requirement may change this.^{34 35}

The OEAP's National Guidance provides a well-established framework to support high-quality outdoor learning and educational visits across the system. However, its presence highlights a wider feature of provision: guidance and curriculum expectations are not the primary limiting factors. Instead, the ability to apply this guidance and embed outdoor learning consistently depends on organisational capacity, practitioner confidence, and the wider contextual conditions outlined above. Even where outdoor learning is legitimised through the curriculum,

as in Scotland, evidence shows that where these conditions are constrained the existence of guidance or statutory expectations alone are not sufficient to ensure equitable access to Outdoor Learning.^{36 37}

4.1.2 APPG Survey findings

The survey findings support the literature. Respondents largely endorsed the view that outdoor learning is valued yet remains insufficiently embedded within policy and accountability frameworks. Advisers described outdoor learning as being perceived as important but secondary to curriculum priorities, whilst school respondents referred to workload and competing priorities as barriers to expansion. Advisers also highlighted the influence of policy expectations and inspection frameworks on organisational behaviour, suggesting that schools often prioritise activities that are formally recognised, measured or inspected. Settings generally reported that outdoor learning is valued, but not always sufficiently embedded to withstand competing pressures.

The strength of this perceived value is reflected in the survey's entitlement question. Across all setting respondent groups, 97% agreed that outdoor learning should be available as an entitlement for every child and young person, regardless of background or circumstance. This support extends beyond the education sector. The 2023 *Outjoyment Report*, based on responses from almost 11,000 people, found that 94% agreed that all children should have the opportunity to learn outdoors and camp as part of their formal education, suggesting that expectations for equitable access to outdoor learning are not confined to practitioners and providers but are widely shared across the public.³⁸

Advisers and providers generally welcomed the policy developments relating to enrichment and personal development. Concerns were expressed, however, that implementation could remain uneven unless underlying barriers were addressed. 50% of advisers and consultants believed that settings regarded outdoor learning as 'important but secondary', suggesting that inequalities are likely to remain. This belief is borne out by schools' current enrichment offers where 31% of primary schools and 39% of secondary school respondents reported that opportunities are only available to half the student population or less (Figure 3).

Concerns about responsibility, liability and perceived risk remain part of the wider context influencing organisational decision-making. However, survey respondents generally identified financial, staffing and organisational constraints as more significant barriers than risk alone.

4.1.3 Discussion

The evidence suggests that the principal barriers to outdoor learning are systemic rather than attitudinal. Across both the literature and survey findings, outdoor learning is consistently regarded as educationally valuable yet remains vulnerable to competing priorities within schools and colleges. This reflects a wider tension between the broad educational outcomes associated with outdoor learning and the narrower measures through which educational success is often judged.

The literature identifies accountability systems, curriculum pressures and difficulties evidencing impact as significant constraints on adoption. The survey findings largely reinforce

this interpretation. While respondents overwhelmingly supported outdoor learning as an entitlement for all children and young people, many also described it as being treated as secondary to core curriculum requirements and other institutional priorities. This suggests that the issue is not whether outdoor learning is valued, but whether existing policy and accountability frameworks provide sufficient legitimacy and incentive for its consistent delivery.

The findings also indicate that guidance alone is unlikely to be sufficient to address unequal participation. England already benefits from a well-developed framework of support through the OEAP National Guidance, while evidence from Scotland demonstrates that curriculum recognition does not automatically translate into universal provision. Instead, the survey points to a broader implementation gap in which organisational capacity, workforce confidence, funding and competing priorities shape whether opportunities become available in practice. This highlights the importance of considering outdoor learning as a whole-system issue rather than a matter of individual school choice.

The survey further challenges assumptions that risk aversion is the primary obstacle to participation. Although concerns about responsibility and liability remain relevant, respondents generally viewed financial, staffing and organisational barriers as more significant. This aligns with the wider literature, which increasingly identifies structural pressures rather than negative attitudes as the predominant constraints on delivery.

4.1.4 Summary

- The evidence indicates that systemic and policy factors exert a significant influence on outdoor learning participation.
- There appears to be widespread agreement that outdoor learning is valuable and should be an entitlement for every child, but provision frequently falls short of demand and organisational aspirations.
- Access seems to be constrained less by a lack of commitment to outdoor learning and more by the structural conditions in which decisions are made. While recent policy developments may help strengthen the legitimacy of outdoor learning, achieving equitable participation is likely to require a combination of policy recognition, organisational capacity, workforce support and sustainable resourcing. Without addressing these wider systemic factors, outdoor learning is likely to remain valued in principle but unevenly experienced in practice.

4.2 Organisational and practitioner factors

While policy and accountability frameworks shape the wider context in which decisions are made, the day-to-day delivery of outdoor learning is influenced by the capacity of individual settings to translate aspiration into practice. Even where outdoor learning is recognised as valuable, schools and other educational settings must balance competing demands on staff time, expertise, funding and organisational resources.

4.2.1 Workforce capacity and competing priorities

At the level of schools and delivery organisations, barriers are shaped by capacity, capability, and institutional culture.

Workforce capacity

The capacity of staff to deliver outdoor learning, whether on or offsite, is central to provision. However, willingness to develop new approaches or take children and young people away on residential is heavily impacted by time and workload pressures, which restrict the ability of staff to plan, adapt, and embed outdoor approaches within an already crowded curriculum. Meaningful pedagogical change requires sustained investment in training and practice, which is difficult to achieve under current conditions.^{39 40 41} While many resources exist to support outdoor learning, the overwhelming range of fragmented online materials makes it difficult for busy teachers to find appropriate guidance.⁴²

Workforce confidence and competence

A consistent theme is the importance of teacher confidence and expertise. Many practitioners report a lack of confidence in delivering learning in outdoor settings (including OAA and outdoor learning in school grounds and local environments), often linked to gaps in initial training and limited opportunities for ongoing professional development.^{43 44 45 46 47} Negative societal perceptions of risk, previously a strong influence on confidence and a barrier to outdoor learning⁴⁸, feature significantly less now in the literature, replaced by a risk-benefit approach and focus on risk assessment as an administrative planning burden.⁴⁹

Leadership, culture and organisational priorities

Leadership plays a critical enabling role. Where outdoor learning is embedded within a school's ethos, it is typically supported by strong, proactive leadership willing to prioritise and defend its value. In the absence of this, provision is more likely to remain ad hoc or marginal.^{50 51}

Practical constraints also persist, including:

- funding for transport, equipment, and staff training⁵²
- staffing capacity and adult-to-child ratios⁵³
- organisational demands associated with planning and delivery⁵⁴

Institutional factors

Settings can also face their own particular challenges. Secondary schools can face significant timetable constraints along with difficulty balancing strict curriculum goals with outdoor activities. In special schools, where pupils may have complex medical conditions, the requirement for significantly more time and specialist support can often preclude the spontaneity typically associated with outdoor learning.⁵⁵ One mechanism for addressing these inequalities is the use of Pupil Premium funding, which supports school capacity to meet the needs of learners facing disadvantage. This funding can be used to subsidise participation, including outdoor learning. However, while it provides an important enabling resource, evidence suggests that it is insufficient to fully offset rising costs and wider financial pressures on families, meaning that affordability remains a significant barrier.^{56 57} These factors reinforce the finding that participation depends heavily on institutional capacity, not just individual willingness.

Quality assurance

Alongside these capacity constraints, quality assurance frameworks must underpin delivery. Mechanisms such as the LOfC Quality Badge provide a means of verifying the quality of third-party provision, reducing the need for repeated, detailed administrative checks by schools and other group organisers. However, the extent to which these schemes reduce workload and improve access depends on their uptake and consistent use across the system.

Almost all Welsh and English local authorities and most Trusts recognise the LOfC Quality Badge. However, as a voluntary scheme, coverage is not universal, resulting in variation in how provision is assessed and accessed across different settings. In practice, this can place additional administrative demands on schools, their employers, and provider organisations, with support from Educational Visit Advisors where available.

This highlights the importance of wider and more consistent uptake of recognised quality assurance schemes, such as the LOfC Quality Badge, to streamline assurance processes, ease administrative pressures, improve access, and support consistent quality standards.

4.2.2 APPG Survey findings

The survey indicates that staffing capacity is not just a delivery issue but also a significant constraint on access throughout the system. 39% of settings report staffing capacity as a significant or major constraint and 56% of respondents identified staffing capacity in their top three limiting factors. Responses also suggest that the capacity issue is growing: 41% of settings report that staffing capacity to support OL has fallen in recent years (Figure 6).

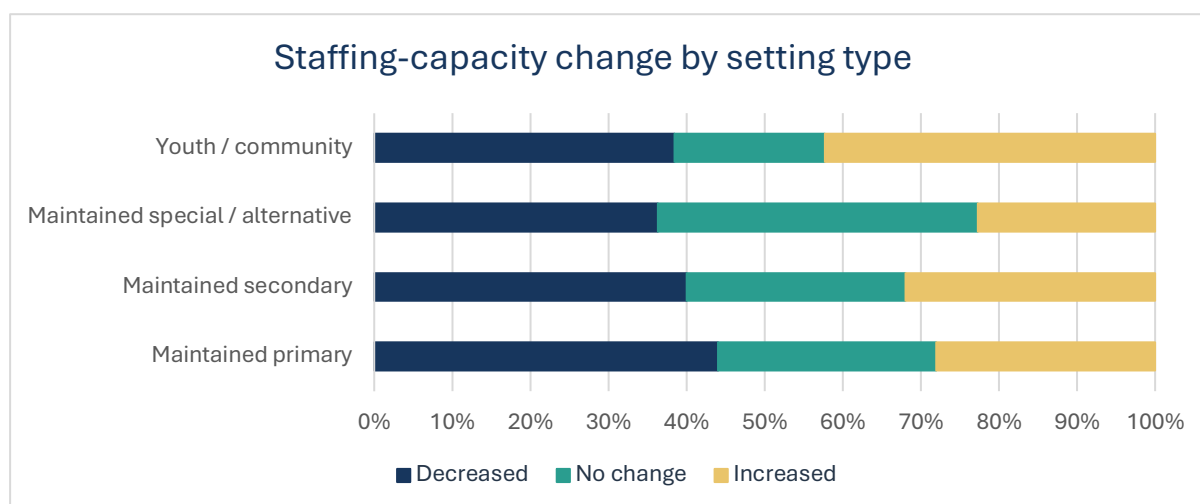


Figure 6. Changes in staffing capacity.

Staff confidence/training is a meaningful secondary barrier: 52% rate it moderate or greater, 24% significant/major, and 21% select staff capability as a constraint on capacity. The strongest outcome relationship is with unmet provision: 77% of settings with a significant/major confidence constraint report provision below ideal, versus 56% of other settings. Advisers and consultants reinforce the finding: 65% and 61% respectively select better training/confidence as an access solution; consultants are more likely to identify staff confidence as a participation constraint or cause of inequality.

Curriculum pressure appears to be primarily a capacity problem rather than opposition to outdoor learning. Curriculum and accountability pressures are reflected in recognition that existing workload is seen as a significant or major barrier by 42% of respondents working in mainstream schools.

Organisational prioritisation was an issue to some degree for 61% of settings. 43% of settings identified more time in the timetable and 27% higher prioritisation of outdoor learning as enabling conditions, both of which are leadership responsibilities. Further indicators of prioritisation are the responsibilities and expectations leaders have of staff. Planning, administration and funding all demand time to address, and, when added to existing workload serve as significant barriers.

A major growing challenge is affordable transport. 40% of respondents from mainstream and youth settings placed it in their top three barriers that had the greatest impact on provision. Transport is a major barrier across maintained schools, but it is most prominent in rural settings where 64% rate it a significant or a major constraint, compared with 42% in city/major-urban maintained schools. Transport is selected among the three greatest barriers by 47% of rural respondents but only 28% of city respondents.

The survey also supports the literature around risk. While risk, responsibility and safeguarding concerns remain important considerations, respondents are more likely to identify financial pressures, staffing capacity, transport and organisational factors as the main factors limiting participation. Although administrative burden is still recognised as a constraint (14% of respondents in mainstream and youth settings would like to see it reduced), the evidence would seem to suggest that initiatives such as National Guidance and the LOfC Quality Badge scheme have had a positive impact.

The survey also highlights an additional challenge with regard to the proposed Enrichment Framework. 85% of maintained primary schools and 93% of secondary schools who responded to the survey rely to some extent on external providers. Beyond activities that are in the local area and able to be delivered within the capabilities of setting staff, external provision often introduces additional costs. Youth and community settings were the most externally reliant group, with 46% either mostly or fully reliant on external providers (Figure 7).

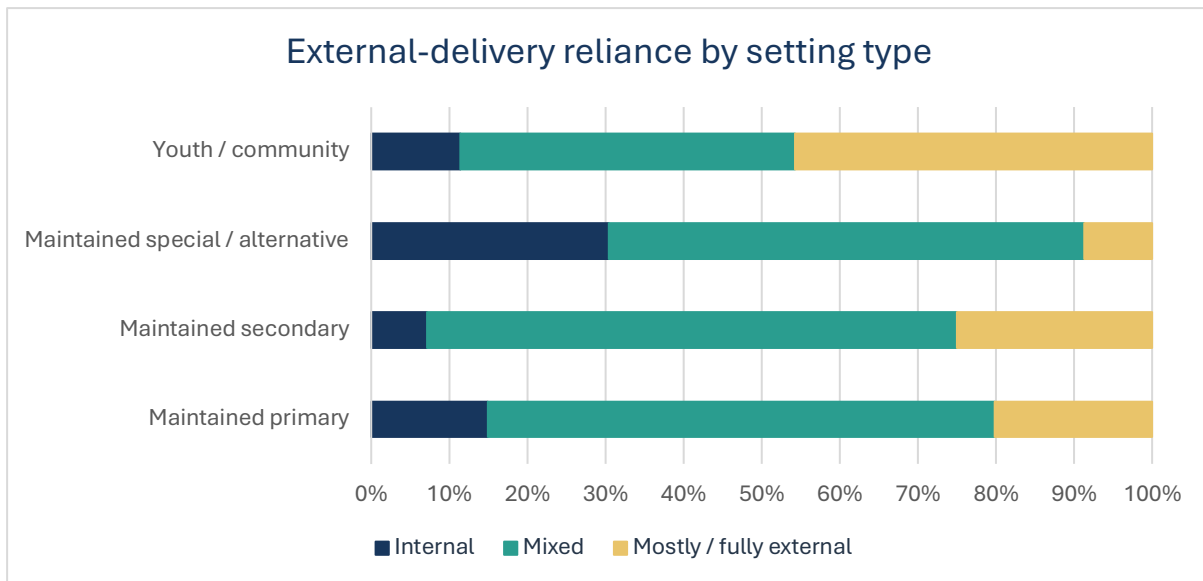


Figure 7. Reliance on external providers to deliver outdoor learning - maintained schools and youth settings

Adventurous activities appear to be particularly affected by these constraints as they often require specialist expertise, equipment and resources. Only 5% of maintained primary schools reported delivering adventurous activities on site and 47% offsite, suggesting that access to nature, outdoors and adventure may be constrained by a combination of policy expectations, practical limitations and financial realities.

4.2.3 Discussion

Organisational capacity emerges as a critical role in determining whether outdoor learning is delivered consistently or remains dependent on individual initiatives. While policy and accountability frameworks create the wider context within which decisions are made, day-to-day participation is shaped by the availability of staff, practitioner confidence, leadership support and organisational resources. The literature identifies these factors as important enablers of implementation and the survey findings broadly reinforce this conclusion.

The findings also indicate that organisational factors rarely operate in isolation. Staffing availability, practitioner confidence and leadership commitment appear to interact with one another, influencing whether outdoor learning is embedded within routine provisions or delivered only occasionally. Even where outdoor learning is valued and recognised as beneficial, limited staff capacity or confidence can constrain implementation, while strong leadership support may help overcome some practical barriers. This helps explain why levels of provision vary considerably between settings apparently facing otherwise similar external circumstances.

The survey therefore supports the view that workforce development remains an important enabling condition for participation. The ability of practitioners to plan facilitate and sustain outdoor learning opportunities appears central to translating organisational aspirations into practise. Consequently, participation is influenced not only by external barriers, but also by the extent to which settings possess the capacity and capability to respond to them.

Capacity and workforce issues have implications for current policy objections as well, including the proposed Enrichment Framework. While reliance on external providers can expand the range of opportunities available to children and young people, it may also increase dependence on transport, staffing capacity and affordability. As much external provision involves additional costs and staffing commitments, there is a risk that aspirations for equitable access to nature, outdoors and adventure will be difficult to realise without significant organisational and financial support. This highlights the importance of considering implementation capacity alongside policy ambition.

4.2.4 Section summary

- The evidence indicates that organisational capacity is a significant determinant of outdoor learning participation. Staffing availability, practitioner confidence, leadership support and workforce capability all influence whether outdoor learning can be embedded within regular practice.
 - Staffing capacity emerges as a particularly important underlying factor, identified by settings and advisers as a major influence on participation.
 - The findings further suggest that workforce development remains an important enabling condition for participation and that organisational factors interact with wider systemic pressures to shape provision.
 - While external providers can broaden access to outdoor learning opportunities, dependence on externally delivered provision may also reinforce challenges relating to staffing, transport and affordability. Consequently, achieving more equitable participation is likely to depend not only on policy recognition of outdoor learning, but also on the organisational capacity required to deliver it consistently and at scale.
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4.3 External factors

Participation is also shaped by beliefs, expectations, and lived experience at the level of young people and their families.

4.3.1 Socio-cultural and participant influences

One key external factor is the perception of the outdoors. Many parents and stakeholders continue to associate “real learning” with classroom-based activity, while outdoor experiences are seen as leisure or enrichment. This conceptual divide can influence both willingness to participate and institutional prioritisation. Parents' views are often rooted in their own cultural and educational experiences, which may not have included outdoor learning and can lead to low parental engagement.^{58 59}

Social norms further shape engagement. In some contexts, mud, mess, and outdoor play are associated with neglect or poverty, creating additional barriers linked to clothing, cost, and social perception. These effects are not evenly distributed and can disproportionately affect disadvantaged groups.⁶⁰

For visits that ask for voluntary contributions, affordability is a considerable concern; even when schools attempt to subsidise using the Pupil Premium, cost remains a primary barrier for pupils from poorer families.^{61 62 63}

Financial barriers are reinforced by wider economic pressures and rising costs. Recent evidence indicates that affordability is becoming an increasingly significant constraint on participation, particularly for residential and off-site day visits.^{64 65}

Increasing reliance on voluntary contributions reflects pressure on school budgets and shifts more cost to families. This in turn can lead to the financial burden becoming particularly acute for families with multiple children and those experiencing wider cost-of-living pressures.

At the system level, these pressures are reshaping provision, with many schools reducing or cancelling visits due to financial pressures or where full participation cannot be achieved.^{66 67} Financial barriers are not only a practical constraint, but a driver of exclusion, inequity, and reduced participation across the system.

Funding is not the only solution, however, as it can inadvertently contribute to unintended exclusion. AAFH, for example, highlighted potential barriers with funded programmes when the delivery window overlaps with religious observances, such as Ramadan, potentially impacting the ability of some ethnic minority groups to engage.⁶⁸ For some young people, particularly those with limited prior experience, participation may also be shaped by:

- low confidence in unfamiliar environments
- anxiety linked to new experiences (especially residential)
- social expectations and peer dynamics

These factors highlight that access is shaped not only by opportunity, but by confidence, familiarity, and cultural framing.

4.3.2 APPG Survey findings

The evidence from the Survey reflects others' perceptions and suggests parent influence operates mainly through affordability and residential anxiety, rather than widespread opposition to outdoor learning (table 4).

Parent concerns

	Not at all %	Slightly %	Moderately %	Significantly %	Major constraint %
General	38	36	17	10	0
Residential	13	43	27	11	6

Table 4. Parent concerns (youth and maintained settings) and their impact on OL provision and residential participation

Parent concerns may be more risk and anxiety orientated for residential and more curriculum focused in school settings.

Affordability

The funding issue is the biggest barrier facing schools. 66% of settings identify it as one of their top three, and 48% of respondents rate it as a significant or major constraint. 65% of settings regard cost as a significant or major barrier to participation on residential.

Although the sample sizes are small, the survey also indicates the difference between private and maintained settings. Cost is a major or significant barrier for 52% of maintained secondary schools, but for only 17% of private secondary schools.

The top four barriers reported by settings to providers are finance related: cost of provision, transport costs, additional staff cover costs and lack of financial (e.g. bursary) support. 90% of providers agree or strongly agree that cost to schools or groups is a major barrier to access. UK residential providers emphasise affordability most strongly (76%) and transport more often (26%) than non-residential providers (52% and 16%), reflecting the increasing cost and complexity of residential provision. Open text comments in the survey describe coach costs, parent contributions and school budgets reducing participation, trip length or bookings.

Participant concerns

The most significant funding - and hence impact on parents - relationship is with residential, but a number of other intersecting factors also come into play that influence participation. The APPG Survey shows that for young people, setting staff believe that being away from home is the dominant concern overall (51%) and is especially prominent in maintained special/alternative (73%) and maintained primary settings (59%) (Figure 8). Maintained secondary settings differ in that 'unfamiliar environments' lead (36%), followed by 'being away from home' (28%) and 'social confidence' (20%). Youth/community responses are more evenly spread across unfamiliar environments (29%), being away from home (25%) and social confidence (25%). Cultural or religious considerations feature as constraints for 9% of primary settings and 11% of youth settings. A similar view was held by providers: 9% identified cultural barriers as a limiting factor to access and only 8% placed reported them in their top three barriers reported by clients.

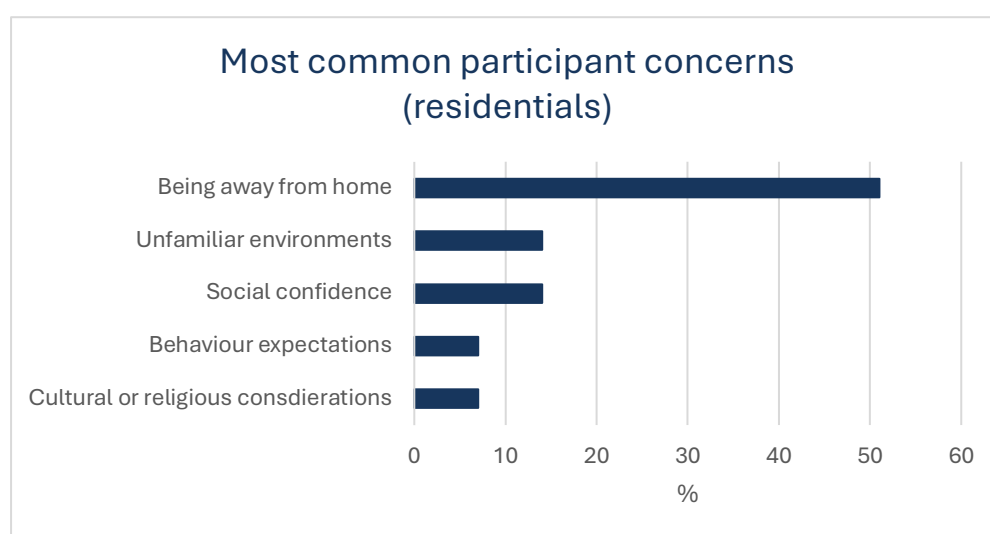


Figure 8. Most common participant concerns reported for residential

These concerns can manifest as anxiety among participants. Table 5 shows how participant anxiety is perceived by settings and providers. Of note is the similarity between providers' and settings' perceptions of anxiety amongst participants. When residential provider responses are isolated, an increase (+7%) in the number of responses assessing the impact as slight can be seen.

	Not at all %	Slightly %	Moderately %	Significantly %	Major constraint %
Participant anxiety/confidence (Setting n=180)	24	41	18	13	4
Participant anxiety/confidence (Provider n=171)	25	42	19	11	4
Residential provider only (n=82)	18	49	17	11	5

Table 5. Setting and provider views of anxiety

4.3.3 Discussion

Cost and affordability emerge as the most significant participant level barriers to outdoor learning participation. The literature consistently identifies financial pressure as a major constraint on access, particularly for day visits, residentials and more complex forms of provision, while the APPG survey found funding to be the most frequently identified barrier across settings and providers. Affordability influences participation both directly, through the cost to families, and indirectly, through pressures on school and organisational budgets that limit the opportunities available. The evidence suggests that financial barriers are therefore not simply a practical challenge but a significant driver of educational inequity, with children and young people from lower income households most likely to miss out as costs increase. This pattern is especially evident in residential provision, where participation declines as additional costs associated with transport, accommodation and staffing accumulate.

Beyond affordability, socio-cultural and participant influences appear to shape outdoor learning participation in more complex ways than the structural and organisational barriers discussed previously. While factors such as family attitudes, previous experiences, cultural expectations and learner confidence can influence engagement, the evidence suggests that these influences interact with wider organisational, financial and geographic factors to shape who participates and who misses out.

A recurring theme within the literature and survey findings is the importance of familiarity and prior exposure. Children and young people who have fewer opportunities to spend time outdoors through family, community or educational experiences may be less likely to engage confidently with outdoor learning opportunities when they arise, a finding supported by Generation Green 2 and Adventures Away from Home.^{69 70} Both programmes successfully engaged young people who faced barriers to participation and in many cases provided their first experiences of staying away from home or experiencing activities in the countryside. This suggests that participation is often cumulative, with previous access creating the confidence, knowledge and expectations that support future engagement.

The findings also highlight the role of families and communities in enabling participation. Practical considerations such as parental support, perceptions of value, financial contributions and the ability to provide appropriate clothing or equipment can influence whether opportunities are accessible in practice. However, these factors should not be viewed solely as individual or family characteristics. They are frequently shaped by broader social and economic circumstances, meaning that socio-cultural influences can contribute to wider patterns of educational inequality.

4.3.4 Section summary

- The evidence indicates that socio-cultural and participant factors influence outdoor learning participation through attitudes, expectations, prior experiences and family circumstances. However, these factors rarely operate independently and often intersect with wider organisational, financial and geographic barriers.
- Previous exposure to outdoor environments and learning opportunities appears to play an important role in shaping confidence and future participation. Family and community circumstances can further influence access through practical support, financial capacity and perceptions of value.

4.4 Access to spaces

4.4.1 Physical place and environmental constraints

The availability and accessibility of suitable environments play a critical role in determining participation.^{71 72}

Schools vary significantly in their access to outdoor space. While some have well-developed grounds or nearby natural environments, others - particularly in urban contexts - may have limited or unsuitable spaces, reducing opportunities for regular engagement. Even where suitable environments exist, proximity is a key determinant. Regular use of local spaces is strongly dependent on whether they are within walking distance, as transport introduces both cost and time constraints. Environmental factors also create barriers to consistency through unpredictable weather, lack of appropriate clothing or storage and limited facilities to support outdoor activity.

4.4.2 APPG Survey findings

Suitable outdoor space is a significant or major constraint for 14% of maintained schools and youth settings, selected among the top barriers by 9%, and 15% say better space would improve participation. Youth/community settings are the least grounds-based (5%) and rely more on off-site places.

In maintained primary schools, 76% provide grounds based outdoor learning, 53% use the local area and 64% offer visits to the natural environment (Table 2). Suitable outdoor space is not a dominant barrier overall: 15% rate it significant/major and 9% select it among their greatest barriers, but its importance varies by setting. Youth/community provision is least grounds-

based (5%) and more dependent on off-site places; 22% select better outdoor-space access as a participation solution.

4.4.3 Discussion

The evidence suggests that physical location influences outdoor learning participation through the availability, accessibility and quality of outdoor spaces. Settings with limited on-site space or restricted access to suitable outdoor environments often face additional demands relating to transport, staffing and funding, linking place-based barriers to the wider constraints discussed earlier in this chapter.

Scope for outdoor learning in the school grounds can vary widely, with some schools having significant resources and others none. The quality of the natural environment accessible to learners is now regarded as an important determinant of both health and curricular opportunities as well as climate resilience and inclusion^{73 74}, recognised at policy level through the National Education Nature Park initiative and the Education Estates Strategy.

Geographic inequalities also appear to influence the nature of opportunities available to children and young people. Urban settings may face different challenges from rural settings, while the quality and accessibility of local green and blue spaces can vary considerably between communities. As a result, physical place can shape both the frequency and type of outdoor learning experiences available.

The findings suggest that place should be understood as an enabling or constraining context rather than a determinant of participation in its own right. The impact of geographic factors is often mediated by organisational capacity, prioritisation, resources and access to external support. Consequently, settings facing place-based disadvantages may be able to overcome them where sufficient support exists, while others may struggle despite being located close to suitable environments.

These constraints reinforce the wider pattern identified in Section 2: baseline access is shaped by place, while progression beyond it depends increasingly on resources and infrastructure.

4.4.4 Section summary

- The evidence indicates that physical place is an important influence on outdoor learning participation. Access to suitable outdoor environments, the availability of on-site space and the characteristics of local communities can all affect the opportunities available to children and young people.
 - However, place-based barriers rarely operate independently. Geographic constraints frequently interact with transport, funding and organisational capacity, increasing the resources required to provide outdoor learning opportunities. As a result, differences in participation are shaped not only by the physical environments available to settings but also by their ability to make use of them.
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4.5 Enablers of participation

Alongside barriers, the evidence from demonstration projects and targeted interventions identifies a set of enabling conditions that support more equitable access and participation in outdoor learning. Programmes such as Natural Connections, Adventures Away from Home and Generation Green 2 demonstrate that children and young people who might otherwise not participate can engage successfully when appropriate support is provided.

These include:

- cross sector partnerships involving the youth, education, environment and health sectors
- strong and supportive leadership
- investment in teacher training and confidence
- access to funding and resources, including affordable transport
- availability of local environments
- parental buy-in
- partnerships with external providers
- targeted support for groups experiencing disadvantage
- access to clear guidance and frameworks (e.g. OEAP National Guidance)

Where these are present, provision becomes more consistent, more inclusive and more sustainable. This reinforces that improving access requires coordinated, system-level intervention, not isolated activity. The survey supports these enabling conditions.

4.5.1 APPG Survey findings

Across settings, providers and advisers there was broad agreement that increasing participation depends less on generating interest in outdoor learning and more on strengthening the conditions that enable access. The survey also suggests that enabling factors operate across multiple levels of the system. At an organisational level, supportive leadership, sufficient staffing capacity and workforce development help settings sustain provision over time. At a practical level, transport, affordability and access to providers influence whether opportunities can be accessed. At a system level, policy recognition, guidance and consistent expectations appear to support wider adoption and embedding of outdoor learning. Figure 9 shows the top enabling factors identified by the various respondent groups.

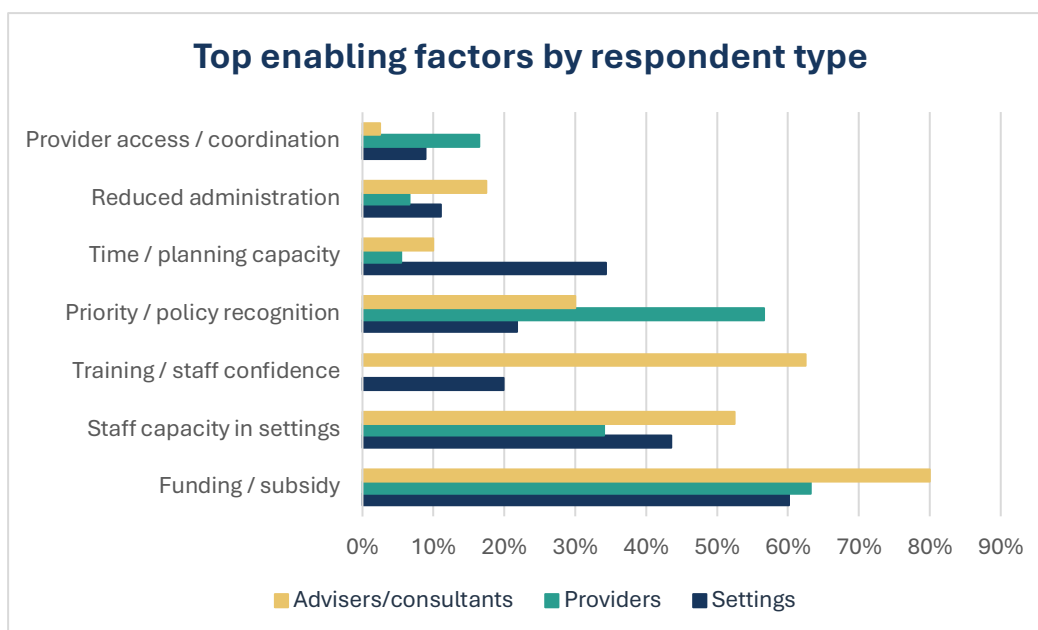


Figure 9. Top enabling factors by respondent category

Funding is the foundational condition across every perspective. 60% of settings say it would increase provision, 58% say subsidy would improve participation, 63% of providers prioritise participant funding, and 80% of advisers/consultants select funding or subsidy as a critical enabling factor.

Staff capacity is the next consistent requirement. Settings select it equally for expanding provision and participation (44% each); 34% of providers call for improved client staffing, while 53% of advisers/consultants select it.

Time matters most inside educational settings. 34% seek more timetable/programme time for provision and 29% more flexibility for participation. High time/workload pressure is associated with provision below ideal in 77% of settings versus 50% where pressure is lower.

Training and confidence are targeted rather than universal setting priorities (20%), but are emphasised strongly by advisers and consultants (63% combined).

Organisational legitimacy is a distinct enabling layer. Only 22% of settings directly request higher priority, but providers strongly favour explicit policy/curriculum recognition (57%), and valued outdoor learning is much more likely to be regularly integrated (48% versus 16%).

Administrative simplification and provider coordination are secondary overall. They may still matter for specific organisations, but the survey does not support presenting them as the principal universal levers.

4.5.2 Discussion

The consistent emphasis placed on funding by settings, providers and advisers suggests the need for a more systematic approach to financial support. One example advanced through the APPG's previous work is the proposed introduction of a [Nature Premium](#), analogous to existing targeted funding streams, to support outdoor learning, access to nature and enrichment opportunities for children and young people. The findings of this report suggest that approaches

of this kind merit further consideration as potential mechanisms for addressing participation inequalities.

Funding is not the only enabling mechanism, however. A critical recurring theme across both the literature and the survey is that no single intervention is likely to overcome participation inequalities on its own. Instead, successful provision appears to depend on combinations of enabling factors operating together. This reflects the earlier finding that barriers are system-wide and cumulative, and suggests that effective solutions are likely to be similarly interconnected: money enables affordability; staffing and time create delivery capacity; training builds confidence and develops values; leadership and policy protect priority; partnerships, administration and suitable places remove context-specific barriers.

4.5.3 Section summary

Increasing participation depend on strengthening the conditions that enable access.

The main enablers identified through the survey are

- Additional funding
- Staff capacity
- Policy recognition and prioritisation
- Time, training and confidence

Current policy initiatives that aim to reduce structural barriers have a clear role to play in expanding equitable access. In order to be effective, however, DfE, DCMS and Defra need to continue to work in partnership with the outdoor learning sector to implement initiatives that address barriers in a coherent, sustainable and interdependent way.

5. Discussion

This chapter brings together the evidence presented in the participation and barriers chapters. Rather than considering participation patterns and barriers separately, it examines how they interact across the outdoor learning system and what these interactions imply for equity, access and future policy development.

5.1 Barriers across the participation pathway

The literature and survey findings show that barriers increase as provision becomes more complex and resource-intensive over the participation pathway.

At lower levels of provision, curriculum time, staff confidence and organisational priorities are the main barriers to provision. As activities become more complex or move off site, transport and logistics, staffing, supervision and the administrative burden become more significant.⁷⁵ At the higher levels of complexity associated with residentials, expeditions and overseas visits, additional factors including cost, participant affordability, staff workload and organisational capacity become more influential (Figure 10).

Strong support for this description of access is provided by the APPG Survey. Respondents consistently reported that participation becomes more challenging as provision becomes more resource-intensive. As discussed earlier, residentials were identified as the point where participation decreases most noticeably.

The survey also suggests that barriers rarely operate independently. Cost, transport, staffing capacity, organisational priorities and participant factors were frequently identified together, supporting the conclusion that participation is shaped by multiple, intersecting constraints rather than isolated barriers. Together, the evidence indicates that access to outdoor learning is influenced not only by the availability of opportunities, but by the cumulative demands associated with delivering and participating in them.



Figure 10. Outdoor learning: opportunities and challenges

5.2 Cumulative disadvantage and non-participation

A key feature of the data is the recurring presence of a non-participation group of young people who appear not to access outdoor learning at all. Although there is no evidence to support the idea that it is the same young people missing out in every category, the evidence does suggest that this is likely due to the interaction of multiple factors, including socio-economic constraints, limited local access, reduced institutional provision and cultural and confidence-related barriers.

The APPG Survey findings indicate that disadvantage may operate at more than one level. Some barriers relate directly to children and young people's circumstances, including affordability, additional needs, confidence and previous experience. Others relate to the capacity of the settings they attend, including staffing, funding and organisational resources. As a result, children and young people experiencing individual disadvantage are often also more likely to attend settings facing wider organisational constraints, potentially reinforcing unequal access over time.

Across settings, providers and advisers, respondents consistently identified disadvantaged children and young people and those with SEND as being most likely to experience reduced participation in outdoor learning. Respondents also highlighted the influence of organisational factors, including staffing capacity, affordability and access to opportunities. Rather than identifying a single cause of exclusion, survey responses suggest that non-participation commonly arises through the interaction of multiple barriers affecting both individuals and the settings that support them.

5.3 Capacity constraints and unmet demand

Evidence from the AAfH initiative and Generation Green shows that participation in outdoor learning can increase substantially when financial and organisational constraints are addressed. Both programmes' demand for places exceeded delivery capacity, suggesting that participation is not constrained by lack of interest but by the availability of opportunities and the means to access them. Provision is constrained by participant circumstances, funding limitations, staffing availability, and organisational and administrative demands. This means that even where interest is high and benefits are recognised, opportunities cannot necessarily be expanded to meet demand, reinforcing the previous finding that the system is capacity-limited rather than demand-limited.

The APPG Survey provides strong support for this interpretation. Across all respondent groups, provision was frequently described as falling short of what organisations would ideally like to offer. Almost two-thirds of settings (64%) reported that their current level of outdoor learning provision was either moderately or significantly below the level they would ideally like to provide (Figure 11). This suggests that current participation levels are influenced not only by demand from children, young people and families, but by the capacity of organisations to provide opportunities.

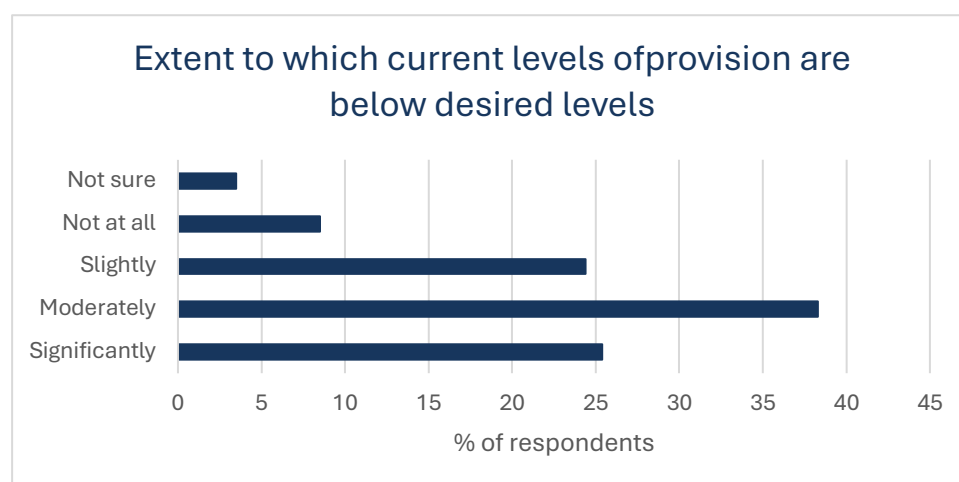


Figure 11. Extent to which current level of settings' outdoor learning provision is below desired levels

This assessment is reflected in wider practitioner evidence. In an August 2026 UK Youth survey⁷⁶ of 238 youth practitioners, 62% identified funding and resources as the single biggest barrier to delivering more outdoor learning, while a further 18% identified staff time, confidence and skills. Far fewer respondents identified access to outdoor spaces (8%), risk assessment and insurance (7%), or young people's interest (5%) as the principal barrier (Figure 12). These findings reinforce the conclusion that participation is influenced primarily by organisational capacity and resourcing rather than a lack of demand or enthusiasm for outdoor learning.

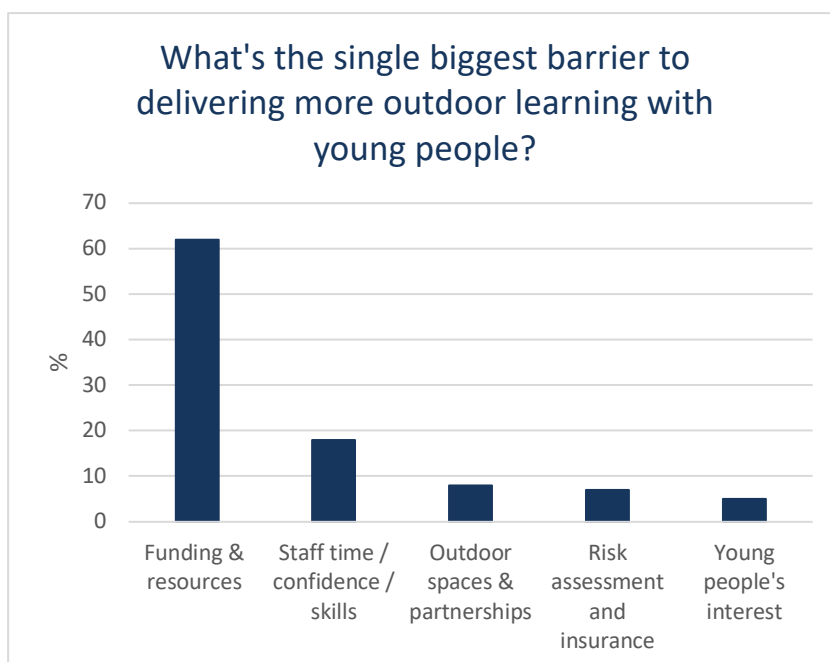


Figure 12. Youth worker’s perceptions of barriers to outdoor learning

The survey shows that capacity constraints operate at multiple levels. Settings frequently identified workload pressure, staffing availability and organisational priorities as limiting factors. Providers highlighted staffing capacity within client organisations and affordability as key constraints on access. Advisers similarly identified workforce capacity and organisational readiness as influencing whether settings are able to expand provision and improve access.

The distinction between desire, demand and participation is therefore important. Interest in outdoor learning may be present amongst children and young people, families, schools and youth organisations, but this only translates into participation when enabling conditions are in place. Financial pressures, staffing limitations, transport requirements, organisational capacity and participant affordability can all prevent intended participation from being realised. As a result, current participation levels are likely to reflect the capacity of the system to provide opportunities as much as the willingness of individuals and organisations to engage with them.

Participation is influenced not only by the value placed on outdoor learning, but by the ability of organisations to create and sustain opportunities at scale. Strengthening access therefore requires attention to the practical conditions that support delivery, including funding, workforce capacity, transport and organisational support. In their absence, access is likely to remain uneven and insufficient to meet demand.

The challenge is not confined to outdoor learning. The recent Independent Review of Young People and Work led by Alan Milburn similarly identified short-term, programme-based funding as a major barrier to effective local delivery systems.⁷⁷ The review argued that short funding cycles undermine long-term planning, weaken trusted relationships and discourage investment in preventative approaches. These findings are highly relevant to outdoor learning, where many successful initiatives (most recently AAfH) have relied on time-limited funding and demonstration projects. The evidence suggests that improving access and equity will require not only additional investment but also greater certainty and longer-term funding arrangements that enable settings, providers and partnerships to plan sustainably.

This is a significant finding in light of the Government's ambitions for enrichment which demand an equitable offer for all children and young people. Without the sustainable means to address these concerns, schools are unlikely to be able to make effective changes to the current, inequitable situation.

5.4 Implications

This report argues that the challenge facing outdoor learning is no longer one of demonstrating value but of ensuring equitable access. Across the literature, participation evidence and APPG survey findings there is broad agreement that outdoor learning can contribute positively to educational, personal and social development. The question for policy makers is therefore less whether outdoor learning matters and more how access to its benefits can be realised consistently across the system.

The evidence indicates that access should be understood as an issue of educational equity rather than simply educational opportunity. Opportunities for outdoor learning may exist within schools, youth settings and local communities, but participation remains uneven. Children and young people facing disadvantage, those with SEND and those attending settings with limited organisational capacity are consistently identified as being at greater risk of missing out. As a result, access to outdoor learning outcomes is not distributed evenly across the population.

These findings are particularly relevant to the Government's proposed Enrichment Framework and the inclusion of the nature, outdoors and adventure strand. The framework provides an opportunity to strengthen the place of outdoor learning within education and youth provision by increasing its visibility, legitimacy and policy recognition. However, the evidence suggests that recognition alone is unlikely to produce equitable participation. Unless implementation is accompanied by sufficient delivery capacity, access is likely to remain dependent on local circumstances organisational priorities and available resources.

The findings also have implications for how entitlement is understood. The APPG survey identified near universal support for the principle that outdoor learning should be available to all children and young people regardless of background or circumstance. While the Enrichment Framework represents an important step towards this goal, participation under the nature, outdoors and adventure strand remains dependent on local capacity and priorities. There is therefore a distinction between an aspirational entitlement and one that is guaranteed in practice. Achieving a meaningful entitlement to outdoor learning will require attention not only to policy ambition but also to the practical conditions that make participation possible, including workforce capacity, affordability, transport, organisational support and access to suitable environments.

Overall, the evidence suggests that widening participation in outdoor learning will require a coordinated and long-term approach. While targeted programmes have demonstrated that many barriers can be reduced, sustained progress is likely to depend on creating the conditions that allow equitable participation to become a normal and embedded feature of educational and youth provision, rather than an opportunity experienced by some groups more than others.

6. Conclusions

Key themes

1. Outdoor learning is valued but not consistently embedded.
 2. Participation becomes less equitable as provision becomes more complex, especially at residential level.
 3. Children and young people facing disadvantage and those with SEND are most likely to miss out.
 4. The system is capacity-constrained rather than demand-constrained.
 5. Funding, staffing, transport and organisational capacity are the dominant barriers.
 6. There is strong support for outdoor learning as an entitlement.
 7. Entitlement must be matched by delivery capacity
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6.1 Outdoor learning is valued but not consistently embedded.

The evidence presented in this report suggests that outdoor learning is widely recognised as a valuable contributor to educational, personal and social development. Recent policy developments, Government funded programmes and participation across a wide range of settings demonstrate its continuing relevance within education and youth provision.

Despite this, outdoor learning remains unevenly embedded across the system. Opportunities are available in many settings, but participation and provision vary considerably according to context, capacity and resources. The evidence therefore suggests that the principal challenge is no longer demonstrating the value of outdoor learning but ensuring that access to its benefits is realised consistently and equitably across the system.

6.2 Participation becomes less equitable as provision becomes more complex, especially at residential level.

Inequalities in participation are not distributed evenly across outdoor learning provision but increase as experiences become more demanding to organise, resource and access. Opportunities in school grounds and local environments appear to provide the broadest participation base, while day visits, residential and overseas experiences are associated with progressively greater barriers to access.

Residential experiences are identified as the point in the participation pathway where participation is most likely to decline. As additional demands relating to cost, transport, staffing, organisation and participant confidence accumulate, opportunities become less evenly distributed. The findings therefore suggest that inequalities in outdoor learning are shaped not only by whether opportunities exist, but by the level of complexity involved in accessing them.

6.3 Children and young people facing disadvantage and those with SEND are most likely to miss out.

A consistent pattern across the participation evidence is that access to outdoor learning is not distributed evenly across the population. Children and young people facing disadvantage, those with SEND, and those affected by wider geographic or organisational constraints are most frequently identified as being at risk of reduced participation.

The evidence also suggests that these inequalities are rarely the result of a single barrier. Instead, they emerge through the interaction of individual circumstances, family resources and the capacity of the settings that children and young people attend. As a result, those already facing disadvantage are often the most likely to encounter reduced access to outdoor learning opportunities. Outdoor learning should therefore be considered an issue of educational equity as well as educational opportunity, with efforts to increase participation focusing particularly on those groups currently underrepresented in provision.

6.4 The system is capacity-constrained rather than demand-constrained.

A consistent finding throughout the report is that participation in outdoor learning is constrained more by delivery capacity than by a lack of interest or perceived value. Across the APPG Survey, 64% of settings reported that current provision was below the level they would ideally like to offer, while 67% reported demand exceeding current delivery.

Participation is shaped largely by the capacity of schools, youth settings and providers to create and sustain opportunities. Workforce capacity, funding, transport and organisational support all influence whether demand can be translated into participation. As a result, current levels of engagement are likely to reflect the limits of the system's delivery capacity as much as the willingness of children, young people and organisations to participate.

6.5 Funding, staffing, transport and organisational capacity are the dominant barriers.

Funding, staffing capacity, transport and organisational constraints are consistently identified as the most significant barriers to participation. While concerns relating to risk, responsibility and safeguarding remain relevant, APPG Survey respondents were more likely to identify practical and resource-related factors as limiting access to outdoor learning. These barriers rarely occur in isolation and become increasingly significant as provision becomes more complex. The findings therefore suggest that improving participation depends not on addressing a single constraint, but on reducing the combined pressures that limit the ability of settings and providers to deliver opportunities consistently and equitably.

6.6 There is strong support for outdoor learning as an entitlement.

The APPG Survey identified near-universal support for the principle that outdoor learning should be available to all children and young people, regardless of background or circumstance. This is consistent with wider evidence indicating strong public support for children's access to outdoor learning experiences.

6.7 Entitlement to outdoor learning must be matched by delivery capacity.

The report argues that achieving equitable access to outdoor learning requires more than policy ambition alone. While recent developments, including the Enrichment Framework, have the potential to strengthen the status of outdoor learning, participation will continue to depend on the capacity of settings and providers to deliver opportunities in practice.

A meaningful entitlement therefore requires the conditions that enable participation, including sufficient workforce capacity, affordable transport, sustainable funding, organisational support and access to suitable environments. Without addressing these factors, there is a risk that access to outdoor learning will remain uneven despite broad support for its expansion.

6.8 Evidence gaps and future research.

There are also a number of evidence gaps highlighted by both the literature review and the survey. While patterns of participation and the factors shaping access are increasingly understood, available data remains fragmented and uneven, limiting the ability to assess how provision varies across settings and forms of provision or where unmet demand is most significant. True participation rates remain unknown, as does a genuine understanding of non-participation, and establishing an effective means of gathering and reporting participation data will aid planning at local, regional and national levels.

Transport appears to be a growing issue that might previously have been absorbed under a general heading of increasing cost but now appears to merit its own consideration. As one respondent commented, 'The cost of transport is making our world smaller. It is becoming cost prohibitive to travel far and wide.' This is likely to have the greatest impact on children and young people who are already geographically, socially or economically distant from opportunities. Longitudinal trends and provider sustainability are also worthy of further exploration.

The survey did not explicitly examine English as an Additional Language (EAL). However, practitioner feedback suggests that language and communication needs may influence participation by increasing the complexity of visit planning, parent engagement and learner support. Future research should explore the extent to which EAL interacts with other barriers to participation and access.

6.9 Overarching summary

Outdoor learning can contribute to educational, personal and social development outcomes. It can also contribute to wider local authority priorities around youth justice, participation, and employability.

The evidence presented in this report convincingly demonstrates that the value of outdoor learning is widely recognised and that demand for participation exists across both the education and youth work sectors. Children and young people should not miss out on outdoor learning because of where they live, what they can afford, the capacity of their setting, or the complexity of the experience being offered. The principal challenge is therefore no longer one of demonstrating the value of outdoor learning but ensuring that access to its benefits is consistently and equitably realised. Achieving this requires sustained investment in workforce capacity, organisational support and participation infrastructure. The DfE, DCMS and Defra should therefore move beyond periodic programmes and short-term interventions, working towards a coordinated national strategy for high quality outdoor learning.



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