

...even under the most pessimistic scenarios, NCS is estimated to have delivered greater social benefits than the costs involved.

Perspective

A dynamic sector?

by IOL CEO, Andy Robinson



How innovative and flexible is our sector?

Can we respond to a significant increase in demand for high quality outdoor learning? Some may say 'chance would be a fine thing!' For the section of the outdoor learning community that can provide a residential experience to 15-17 year olds, the National Citizen Service (NCS) is providing that 'chance'. The Cabinet Office-backed programme that started out with pilots seven years ago is just going through a tendering round focused on growing provision through to 2018.

What is NCS? If you've not come across it and its commendable objectives, it is worth visiting the NCS Trust's website ² (an independent organisation set up by the Cabinet Office to oversee the programme). It is designed to bring together young people from different backgrounds and help them to develop greater confidence, self-awareness and responsibility. It encourages personal and social development for young people by working on skills such as leadership, teamwork, and communication. This is achieved through a two separate residential weeks (the first being outdoor-based) and the development and delivery of a social action project that deals with a local issue the delegates are passionate about. Over 37,000 young people took part in the Summer and Autumn of 2013, a figure that will be exceeded this year. An Ipsos MORI evaluation of this work can be viewed online ¹.

At a time when the growth in the outdoor learning sector has been biased to primary school age through residential and forest school types of provision, the NCS's objectives to see 100,000's of 15-17 year olds benefit from an outdoor based personal development residential is refreshing. This of course coincides with the significant reduction or withdrawal of local authority funded youth work and associated reduction in that population's access to outdoor activities.

Whilst many large organisations are developing their versions of the programme, improving recruitment, developing new and innovative approaches to community projects and looking to provide economies of scale and refined quality assurance, there has been limited innovation in the outdoor residential phase. Our sector is facing real challenges as the timing of the programme overlaps with some traditionally busy times of year for outdoor providers.

Reflecting on the outdoor sector's response to those capacity challenges highlights some interesting issues including the resourcing problems of working with a funding model based on groups of 15 and not knowing actual numbers in advance (recruitment to the programmes varies); managing the diverse backgrounds and abilities within the groups and having the staff who can provide guided reflection throughout the programme, plus dealing with the overcrowding and environmental issues that intense use can bring to popular activity venues.

These are exciting and, potentially, really constructive challenges. Now is not the time to say 'that doesn't fit our delivery model'. If we want to contribute to ensuring a wider cross-section of young people are exposed to outdoor learning, now is the time to get creative. Though we should go in to this with our eyes open, there's loads of scope to reach more young people and stretch and develop your practices and businesses through engaging with this programme.

IOL has worked with the NCS Trust to help provide guidance in procuring good quality outdoor learning residential services for the Trust's delivery partners. Together with our own partners such as AHOEC and BAPA, we will look to ensure that there is effective feedback and guidance available to the Trust as the growth of the programme continues. Inevitably such initiatives are subject to changes of Government and associated changes in ideology and funding priorities, though the scale and success of the NCS programme in terms of its use of the outdoors exceeds other recent attempts to engage young people and deserves to be taken seriously by our sector. ■

References

1. <http://www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/publications/1692/National-Citizen-Service-2013-Evaluation.aspx>
2. <http://www.ncsy.co.uk/>

Photograph: Brathay Hall