

# What's the reality



**Cressida Allwood and Andy Hardie answer questions about their research into gender and leadership in the Outdoor Learning sector.**

## **Tell us a bit more about the research?**

The primary goal was to gain further understanding of the realities and challenges of gender and leadership within organisations in the Outdoor Learning sector. The research follows on from a piece previously published in *Horizons* (issue 75, p12) called *Better Together*. This piece identified a number of gender-related issues, such as a lack of female leaders in the sector and discrepancies between the genders about who is responsible for gender equality.

It was anticipated that generic, attainable good practice and recommendations would emerge.

## **Why is it important to research this?**

Little practical action research has been undertaken that involves exploring perspectives of leaders on a day-to-day level to uncover some of the real issues, in different contexts.



## **VISIT THE HORIZONS ARCHIVE**

Go to the Horizons archives to read the article *Better Together* by Cressida Allwood. Search by title: <https://www.outdoor-learning-research.org/Horizons-Archive>

Ultimately the aim was to generate positive behavioural and/or operational change.

## **What was the research process and who was involved?**

Three organisations volunteered to undertake action research: Telford & Wrekin Council, The Prince's Trust and Venture Trust. Each organisation decided upon a topic and a series of questions they wanted to consider. Although the research process varied, each organisation went through similar thought processes and steps:

- **Deciding upon the question/s they wanted to investigate.**

Often the pertinent questions emerged and changed once initial work had been undertaken.

Telford & Wrekin Council considered five questions around gender equality. The research engaged with: two Outdoor Centre Managers for an internal perspective; a Head Teacher to gather key customer perspectives; and the Outdoor Education Service Management Steering Group.

The Prince's Trust explored perceptions of gender difference and factors which influence recruitment in the Adventurous Activities departments of the charity. Twelve face-to-face interviews involved staff from a range of seniority; from Senior Development Instructor to the CEO.

At Venture Trust, which has a female lead, the male Operations Manager asked three questions to clarify the organisation's position on gender equality. Different forms of data were assessed, including asking an instructor to share her experiences, to further understanding from a female perspective.

- **Ensuring as far as possible that the parameters of research were realistic.**

Giving consideration to the respective roles and workloads of the researchers.

- **Conducting the study and writing up the research results.**

- **Generating recommendations and good practice for their organisations and the sector.**

This involved reflecting on questions like, 'what?', 'so what?' and 'what next?'.

*The interview continues on page 28, with the sharing of key research findings, what's next and good practice guidance.*

## **ORGANISATION PROFILES**

The organisations involved in the research have very differing structures, customer bases and strategic aims. This influenced their research approach.

As a national charity working with vulnerable young people (11 to 30 years-old) The Prince's Trust focused on internal departments, whereas Venture Trust, a smaller but growing charity which works with vulnerable people (16 years-old upwards), were more reflective in their approach.

As a Local Authority provider of outdoor provision, Telford & Wrekin Council are focused on young people in education; their research was more collaborative, including involving external partners. The project coincided with a new service provision, hence their motivation was towards a forward-looking provision with equal opportunities for personal development for boys and girls through Outdoor Education.

## Prince's Trust

At the Prince's Trust, five themes emerged after analysis of the 12 interviews. These led to several recommendations:

1. In regard to current staff gender ratios, all staff (regardless of seniority) over-estimated the number of female employees in the outdoor section (3:1 male-to-female). This raised the notion of unconscious bias operating. There is a need for accuracy and transparency of data to avoid decision-making based on assumptions and interactions. All of us need to bear in mind that the assumptions we make are not always correct.
2. The benefits of having greater gender parity in leadership roles were unanimously agreed. This was linked to the impact on customers and the need for young people to experience leadership from men and women.
3. The CEO identified gender disparity as needing to be a strategic priority, from the top down, to encourage change.
4. The role of media and advertising to promote greater representation of women was considered. Staff recognised that women were often invisible or less well represented.
5. Finding other ways of growing talent and promoting the outdoors as a feasible career option was explored, showcasing Prince's Trust, as an employer to attract young women.

## Telford & Wrekin Council

As part of a review of the Outdoor Education provision at Telford & Wrekin Council, Jo devised five key questions which have partially been answered through dialogue with internal and external partners. The work is ongoing, but here are some findings so far:

**How are gender and Outdoor Education viewed by schools who use the Outdoor Education centre?** The Head Teacher (male) of a Primary school identified role modelling as having a big impact. The stereotypical 'macho/ dress down image' was considered, along with the clothing pupils are expected to wear and the programme content.

**How is gender within Outdoor Education understood at the Outdoor Education centre?** The imbalance in staffing structure was considered and an additional permanent staff member was appointed. More careful consideration was given to staff changing facilities to improve the working environment.

**Is raising awareness of gender a critical factor for the development of a sustainable commercial service model?** Assessing the buildings and improving accommodation to make it more attractive to all has been highlighted. The social space options for when young people are not taking part in activities have likewise been reviewed. More research has yet to be undertaken on exclusion based on gender and how this impacts bookings and income.

In Jo's words:

"We are just beginning our understanding of gender parity in Outdoor Education and the development of leadership in women."



This research  
was sponsored  
by IOL

## CASE STUDY FINDINGS

### Venture Trust

At Venture Trust the male Operations Manager undertook a process of reflection and critical review, testing a hypothesis that the organisation 'felt balanced' from a personal perspective. By assessing different forms of data- quantitative (using statistics from the HR department) and qualitative- Andy formed a picture of Venture Trust that both endorsed and challenged his starting point.

From examining positive aspects of the female-lead culture he concluded that they had much good practice to celebrate and share.

A female instructor had an opportunity to share both positive and negative experiences and perceptions, including the impact of sexist behaviours from male customers which linked to aspects of vulnerability. Career retention strategies and the powerful influence of female role models were also highlighted. Being "valued from above" emerged as a key component for all. Venture Trust may have continued to be unaware of the less helpful gendered aspects, had the research not taken place. This poses new questions for the organisation to address; it is in a powerful position to influence how sexism is understood and managed by all.

### LEARN MORE

Turn the page to learn more about key research findings and good practice recommendations.





### What are the key research findings?

1

Each organisation identified key areas and gaps in gender parity provision. A set of good practice recommendations was devised.

2

Although unhelpful gender-related aspects were uncovered within all organisations, awareness of these enabled more positive interventions to be recommended and put in place, ensuring greater gender equality.

3

Current good practice exists and needs to be more widely shared and celebrated.

4

The value of young men being able to work with a female leader, in traditionally male-dominated leadership positions, emerged as a significant topic. The benefits of meaningful interactions between the genders in such scenarios was deemed to be important for all.

### WANT TO KNOW MORE ABOUT GENDER PARITY?

Gender parity measures statistics to identify gender inequalities.

Read more here:  
<https://www.newamerica.org/weekly/edition-174/what-gender-parity/>

5

Organisations recognised the benefits of having women in senior and influential roles both to inspire recruitment and retention and to challenge stereotypes sometimes held by clients.

## Gender parity is everyone's business and everyone's gain

Overall, our research findings highlight how, though we face and experience life differently, together we can work through issues to find more productive and meaningful solutions for mutual gain.

We all have a role to play. For example, as some of the barriers faced by women working in the sector may not be experienced by men, some men don't see or understand the myriad of ways they can effectively support and input. It's also important for women to speak out about these experiences to help take constructive measures to improve their situation.

*(Cressida says)*

As a female researcher, reviewing Andy's work, I became consciously aware that male employees also have their leadership challenged by other men, although the manner in which such challenges take place is likely to be different. Aspects of masculinity and how men consciously or unconsciously support or challenge one another is an area for further research.

### How can others use the insights from your research?

The good practice guidance is a good place to begin, but also by reflecting on the findings and considering them in the light of their practice, and that of their organisation.

Engage others in the conversation to generate positive change from within. Share the findings and act on changes they're prepared to make (now and in the future).

### If you were starting again, what would you do differently?

It's a big ask for individuals to find enough time voluntarily to be involved with an ongoing work-based research project. We'd invite individuals to agree timelines and then double them! We'd also set up a steering group to support and monitor progress.

### Is there anything else you'd like to share with us?

Do as the researchers did!

Find ways to open up potentially difficult conversations, even though they may present challenges. Find ways to overcome these and move into new ground. Take a risk and see where it leads!



### IMAGES

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# WHAT DOES GOOD PRACTICE LOOK LIKE?

## WHAT ARE YOU DOING?

Read through the good practice guidance, tick what you already do and make a note of what you plan to do next.

	ALREADY DOING	ON MY RADAR	NEED TO LOOK AT	MY NOTES
> Gender parity needs to be a <b>strategic imperative</b> if we're serious about change. Otherwise it's a 'nice to have' but not a priority.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
> <b>Talk</b> to the CEO or/and Board about the costs of gender inequality for customers, stakeholders and for men and women in the workplace.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
> <b>Recognise the attributes</b> that female leaders bring and how these positively influence culture: creating working environments and practices that nurture talent, ensuring staff feel valued and heard.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
> <b>Demonstrate value.</b> Know who the female role models are within your organisation and acknowledge the significant positive impact they have. When (younger) women see others in positions of power, career advancement for women is perceived as being attainable and taken seriously.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
> <b>Be flexible</b> regarding staff retention (e.g. for those who are keen to return to work after having children). Positive promotion of career pathways and an openness to seeking alternative positions benefits both the organisation and the individual.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
> <b>Review</b> current inward and outward images used in media or PR activity, ensuring a balanced representation of men and women. Do not assume current imagery is balanced.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
> <b>Set up</b> a working group (that includes different genders) to champion and promote gender equality practices.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
> <b>Find out</b> about the ways in which people of different gender are challenged by other genders (both customers and colleagues) in terms of unhelpful gendered language or behaviours. Acknowledge that there are likely to be behaviours and assumptions that could alter, for mutual gain. Invest in unconscious bias training and acknowledge less helpful biases and their impact.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
> <b>Listen:</b> notice how others speak about and to women. Demonstrate support for equality, whilst acknowledging that this may not be easy for some.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
> <b>Mentor</b> women to boost confidence and demonstrate belief in their capabilities to move up (or across if appropriate) the outdoor career ladder. Ensure mentors of different sexes; men have a significant role to play.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	

## AUTHORS

Cressida Allwood, MA FRGS and Andy Hardie, APIOL BACP

Cressida, Partnership Liaison Officer for Mountain Training England and Expedition Leader, is also the current Chair of BMC's Equity Steering Group.

Andy is Operations Manager for Venture Trust. He has worked with a focus on personal development and experiential learning in Outdoor centres and on expedition programmes. He is an APIOL and an accredited, registered member of BACP.

