

THE RIGHT TO EXPLORE

In 2019/20, the Right to Explore project began with the ambition of providing “outdoor leadership opportunities for young people from a range of diverse ethnic backgrounds, in order to support development of role models in outdoor leadership” (1). Right to Explore is a collaborative partnership between Lindley Educational Trust, Shadwell Basin Outdoor Activity Centre, Coventry City Council/Plas dol y Moch and The Outward Bound Trust, funded by The North Face and DEFRA’s Green Challenge Recovery fund, Generation Green. Programme success is evident in a survey conducted by The Outward Bound Trust with the 2019/20 cohort of young leaders, with: “82% of the group introducing one or more family members to the outdoors through informal leadership”; “60% having completed outdoor leadership training/qualifications”; and “75% having gained paid employment leading groups in the outdoors” (1).

In 2021, the initiative grew, with 24 young leaders undertaking the programme with support from four mentors across the UK. Right to Explore, the short film which documents the experiences of these young leaders, premiered in December 2022. Horizons caught up with Kate O’Brien (Equity, Diversity and Inclusion Strategic Lead for The Outward Bound Trust) to hear more.

Kate, you recently spoke at Kendal Mountain Festival 2022 with some of the young people who took part in the programme to promote the project and the upcoming film release. How was the experience and what was the response?

Kate O’Brien: It was great to be able to offer a few of the young leaders a platform to talk about their experiences, as well as hear from the mentors on the programme. They shared the impact it had within their lives and what further opportunities had been opened up as a result. Naimah is now in a full-time position working as an outdoor youth worker at Lindley Educational Trust, enabling others from her community to get out and enjoy nature. Yahya spoke about how doing the course opened his eyes to what was on the doorstep and how valuable it has been getting out in the Peak District on bikes with his friends at the weekends, as well as connections with his football coaching and working with younger children. We weren’t sure how many people to expect at the talk and were really pleased that the seats were full, with many people joining in around the edges. There was the kind of applause where you can really feel the audience’s appreciation and resonance at the words spoken, as well as some fantastic questions about what people can do to ensure the outdoors really is for everyone.

Right to Explore is a powerful film which gives a valuable platform to the voices of young leaders. “Everybody needs someone they can look up to” says Yahya, a young leader from the 2021 cohort who passionately and confidently discusses the importance of role models for young people in the outdoors. Michelle, another participant, emphasises the personal development that these young leaders require in order to broadly affect

their own communities, “once you start to feel comfortable with yourself and confident, then you’re able to pass it on to other people as well”.

Kate, the Right to Explore film gives wonderful insight into the impact of the project on participants and the broader narrative which it’s trying to address. How important is it that you’re able to share the project through film?

Kate O’Brien: Film is the perfect medium to capture both the environments explored through the course and the individuality of the young people and their stories. Sharing via film is important to communicate the message that opportunity can spark positive impacts for people which can then have a ripple effect within families and communities, and lead on to further opportunities. It also allows the young people’s voices to reach a wider audience within the outdoor sector, and attract potential interest and funding for the programme to continue into the future.

The film explores some important topics, including the use of the term BAME (Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic) in conversations around diversity and inclusion in the outdoors. Sahra Ahmed, from the Lindley Educational Trust, raises the discussion in the film and argues that “[BAME] is a very lazy way of saying ‘here’s your label’...you’ve given me a title I didn’t ask for, you’ve given me a title that doesn’t say who I am. Everyone’s got their own identity, every community has got their own identity. I feel like it creates a ‘them and us’ kind of environment”. Right to Explore also picks up on other important topics with regard to inclusion, one of which being the growing body of research which identifies the connection between time spent in nature/green spaces and wellbeing.



MEMBER SPOTLIGHT



Kate, with increasing levels of depression and anxiety amongst young people in the UK, how important is it that the outdoors is an accessible space for everyone?

Kate O'Brien: So important! Getting into the outdoors can be a daily well-being strategy if you know it's an option and have the physical and mental means to access green spaces nearby where you live. This could be knowledge about where to go, confidence to go there, skills to find your way or plan a route, people to go with, the kit to stay warm and protected from the elements or the feeling of psychological safety that comes from feeling like you belong in that space. Accessibility is about so much more than physically being able to get somewhere. Many of the young leaders talked about living in urban environments in the UK and coming from family backgrounds where it is not the norm to grow up being taken into the countryside. Knowing that local outdoor spaces exist and having the skills and confidence to go there, whether for exercise, adventure, socialising or quiet contemplation, can offer an option to de-stress and reconnect with nature in a way that is within people's control and daily freedoms. Everyone should have access to such possibilities for looking after their own wellbeing.

In the film, participants discuss the transferable skills they developed from the programme. How effective do you feel outdoor and adventurous activities are for developing widely applicable and long-lasting skills for participants?

Kate O'Brien: With this programme, the combination of the outdoors and adventurous activities close to home as well as trips into the National Parks staying at residential centers was a really effective way of building a wide ranging and transferable skillset. This included activity focused skills, such as navigating, paddling a canoe or pitching a tent, which were transferred to different locations and contexts, including teaching others back in participants' communities. The social side also stood out as being really important to the group. Meeting new people from different parts of the UK, working together and overcoming challenges in a group was commented on as something essential at that transitioning stage of life where many were going on to college, apprenticeships, university or employment. The nature of doing all these things in new, exciting and memorable environments means they stick. There is also something

about coming away from your everyday life and peer group that offers an opportunity to see aspects of yourself previously unseen, and to get feedback on strengths and opportunities for growth that can allow new choices and future pathways to open up.

Right to Explore is available to watch on The Outward Bound Trust **YouTube channel**. For more information on the Right to Explore programme, head to **The Outward Bound blog** and for more on the impact of Outward Bound courses, check out their **Social Impact Reports** ▲

KATE O'BRIEN

Equity, Diversity and Inclusion Strategic Lead for The Outward Bound Trust

Kate has worked in outdoor personal development for over 20 years. Formerly as a youth worker, instructor, field guide and more recently evolving into project management and strategic leadership, enabling The Outward Bound Trust to become a more equitable, diverse and inclusive organisation. This has involved organisational development, as well as the design and delivery of the Women's Outdoor Leadership Course and

The Right to Explore programme for young people from a range of diverse ethnic backgrounds. When not at work Kate can be found up a mountain on skis, riding her bike or by the fire with her cats and a good book.



REFERENCES

1. <https://www.outwardbound.org.uk/blog/the-right-to-explore>

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