



# High Quality Outdoor Learning

for Policy and Decision Makers





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## Foreword

# Welcome to High Quality Outdoor Learning 2025 for Policy and Decision Makers

The field of outdoor learning is broad and incredibly rich. A wide variety of approaches, engage participants of all ages and backgrounds in experiences that have the power to be life changing. With significant societal challenges including climate change, equality & diversity in the outdoors, mental health and wellbeing, this guide sets out what good practice looks like, supporting practitioners and providers to deliver the best possible outcomes to their participants.

At the heart of the IOL's core purpose is a commitment to high quality outdoor learning, and High Quality Outdoor Learning 2025 has a strong heritage. The original document, High Quality Outdoor Education, was written by members of the Outdoor Education Adviser's Panel in 2005 to complement the good practice already identified in Physical Education. A decade later, the changing landscape of the outdoor sector led the English Outdoor Council to update the original, broadening

its scope to encompass the wider field of outdoor learning in High Quality Outdoor Learning. Both publications had at their heart ten outcomes that were indicators of high quality practice. The ever-expanding body of research into the value of outdoor learning has evolved understanding about what constitutes quality. This, alongside increasing opportunities to engage with different sectors to help meet their goals, means that a further update is both necessary and timely.

The Institute for Outdoor Learning is the professional body for organisations and individuals who use the outdoors to make a positive difference for others. IOL is driven by a vision of outdoor learning as a highly valued form of development, education and employment in UK society, and our Members have a shared vision of outdoor learning as a highly valued form of development, education and employment in UK society.

IOL helps set standards and collaborates with many organisations to improve the quality of outdoor learning in the UK. This document offers a framework for providers, practitioners, funders, policy makers and clients to understand the factors involved. It explores the elements of practice and the underlying structures that contribute to the achievement of quality outcomes.

**Drawing on the expertise of numerous organisations, academics and practitioners, it sets a benchmark for quality across the field of outdoor learning.**

High Quality Learning 2025 for Policy and Decision Makers is here to be used and shared with those who make a positive difference to others, society and the environment. This first edition document marks the Outdoor Learning Sector's desire and intention to collaborate, think anew and create strategies for the future on how outdoor learning can make its full contribution to UK society and beyond.



Brian Kitson,  
Chair of IOL Trustees



Jo Barnett,  
CEO



Photo by Karl Midlane



# Introduction

This summary is intended for policy and decision makers who wish to understand more about the benefits and impacts of outdoor learning for children, young people and adults. It draws on the Institute for Outdoor Learning Guide to High Quality Outdoor Learning (HQOL 25), a guide to practice bringing together research and experience from around the world.

**Part 1** provides an overview of outdoor learning, its benefits, and the broader societal context that it relates and contributes to. **Part 2** introduces a model for examining quality in outdoor learning.

## A note about terminology

In this guide we use the terms **provider**, **practitioner**, and **participant**:

**'Providers'** refers to organisations using an outdoor learning approach, for example, schools, clubs, youth groups, outdoor centres, environmental / conservation organisations. They may be public bodies, charities, private companies or sole traders.

**'Practitioners'** are the individuals that facilitate learning. They include teachers, instructors, coaches, tutors, leaders, therapists, educators, facilitators, etc.

**'Participants'** may be clients, group members, guests, accompanying adults / staff, coaches, students, pupils etc.

## Acknowledgements

HQOL25 has been compiled by Dr Dave Harvey, on behalf of the Institute for Outdoor Learning, drawing on sector standards, evaluations, reports, conference workshops and academic research. It expands and develops the previous High Quality Outdoor Learning guide, published by the English Outdoor Council in 2015, and acknowledges the work of Martin Smith, the EOC members who contributed to that publication, and Martin Hore and members of the Outdoor Education Advisers Panel who wrote the original EOC publication High Quality Outdoor Education in 2005.

We would like to thank the following people for their enthusiasm, time and critical input to this document: Dr Roger Hopper, Dan Cook, Graham French, Clive Atkins, Martin Smith, Elspeth Mason, Glen Probert, Neal Anderson, Richard Retallick, Luschka van Onselen, Louise Edwards and Andy Robinson.

This summary is based on HQOL25 and should be cited as:

IOL (2025) High quality outdoor learning: a guide for policy and decision makers. Institute for Outdoor Learning.





## Part 1

# An overview of outdoor learning

**Outdoor learning is a term that covers various approaches to engaging with the outdoors for learning and developmental purposes.**

Outdoor learning can be, and is, applied in different contexts and interpreted in numerous ways. School-based practitioners, for example, may have different views to instructors working in outdoor adventure settings, while personal and organisational definitions may vary again depending on the country where it is taking place. The specific intention of outdoor learning programmes will vary accordingly, leading to different outcome goals and ways of achieving them. Central to all of them is the role of the practitioner, whether regarded as a facilitator, instructor, teacher, coach, educator, therapist, tutor or guide. All of these identities place the practitioner at a critical point in the process where they can act as a catalyst, accelerating the journey towards desired outcomes.

One of the outdoor practitioner's key roles, therefore, is to facilitate learning.

Experiencing the outdoor environment first-hand is what makes outdoor learning unique as an approach. However, the use of outdoor learning in different contexts means that it is necessary to acknowledge the role of the indoors and technology as well. As the scope of this guide embraces the field of outdoor learning it adopts a broad interpretation:

**'Outdoor learning is an umbrella term for actively inclusive facilitated approaches that predominantly use activities and experiences in the outdoors which lead to learning, increased health and wellbeing and environmental awareness'**

**In this guide the term 'outdoor learning' embraces an approach to teaching and learning that:**

- » Involves being outdoors as a central part of the experience.
- » Strives to be inclusive and accessible.
- » Seeks to engage with the outdoor environment as a place where experiences are transformed into knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviours.
- » Always respects the environment.
- » Is often cited as being both memorable and fun.

**Outdoor learning can include:**

- » A challenging, adventurous element.
- » A residential component.
- » Physical activity.

Outdoor learning may include recognised activities with an adventurous component that are also undertaken for recreation and leisure, such as canoeing, climbing, hill walking, camping, orienteering or sailing; outdoor activities purposely designed for their educational impact, such as fieldwork, curricula subject lessons, forest schools, trails, bushcraft, initiative challenges and rope courses; and the use of the outdoors as an experiential environment for both cognitive, non-cognitive and therapeutic development. Such experiences may occur at or close to a school, club or centre site, at a distance from that site or during a residential or expedition experience in the UK or abroad.

Outdoor learning is primarily an approach to teaching and learning through these and other similar activities and through broader experiences in the outdoors. The most noticeable outcomes are achieved when outdoor learning is designed as a frequent and progressive activity relating to broader learning that links to everyday experiences in a specific setting (such as a classroom, youth club or community hub) and to real-life experiences beyond. However, it must not be forgotten that the experiences are often hugely memorable in themselves and, more often than not, highly enjoyable, having merit as experiences in their own right.

# 1.1

## How people participate

**This guide focuses on the delivery of high quality outdoor learning – what it looks like and how to achieve it. It recognises that outdoor learning takes place, not only in the formal education sector and through outdoor providers, but equally in youth services and voluntary youth organisations, as well as in a wide range of outdoor activity clubs that cater for young people, health settings and in peer and family groups.**

Outdoor learning takes place, not only in the formal education sector and through outdoor providers, but equally in youth services and voluntary youth organisations.

While a great deal of outdoor learning provision exists to meet identified needs (e.g. through schools, youth projects, health, etc), many people access outdoor learning experiences for their own personal reasons. The degree of autonomy a person has, which increases for many people in adulthood, means that provision can reflect a wide variety of reasons for engagement with the outdoors, overlapping with recreation. They may wish to increase their activity skills, be supported to achieve a particular goal or improve their knowledge of the natural environment.

### Schools

Schools have a central role to play in delivering high quality outdoor learning. They may provide outdoor and adventurous activities within the PE curriculum; fieldwork in science or geography; regular forest school sessions or curriculum linked lessons outdoors. Many schools offer out-of-school-hours learning opportunities through clubs and the Duke of Edinburgh's Award, plus day and residential visits to field study centres and outdoor education/activity providers.



### Further and higher education establishments

Further and higher education establishments offer courses that develop knowledge, skills and values relating to the field of outdoor learning and which lead to formal academic qualifications. University programmes include Degree, Masters, PhD and teacher education programmes. Students on non-outdoor related courses may also benefit from outdoor learning programmes focused on personal and social development.

### Apprenticeships and trainee schemes

Apprenticeships and trainee schemes offer alternative training pathways to formal academic qualifications.

### Youth programmes

Youth programmes, such as the Duke of Edinburgh Award Scheme, the National Citizen Service and similar awards, are being delivered through a range of agencies.



### Youth services and groups

Youth services and groups in both the statutory and voluntary sectors provide significant outdoor learning opportunities as part of their curriculum and youth and play programmes, many of which have personal and social development as a prime focus. The voluntary youth organisations have a long tradition of work in this field (the terms 'youth services' and 'youth organisations' are used interchangeably in this document). Schools and youth services have in common the ability to measure the impact of outdoor learning in the context of a young person's whole development over an extended period.



Photo by Karl Midlane



Uniformed youth groups

Uniformed youth groups, for example, the Girlguides, Scouts and Cadets, offer opportunities to engage in outdoor learning experiences through badges, awards, expeditions and adventure training.



Outdoor education/activity providers

Outdoor education/activity providers include those managed by local authorities, schools or groups of schools, voluntary and charitable organisations and the commercial sector. All have the potential to make a substantial impact on the personal and social development of the young people they engage with; for many this is their primary purpose. Providers also engage with family and adult groups, often working in partnership with social, health, justice, faith-based and adult (lifelong) learning agencies. Outdoor learning approaches are also used with businesses to support the development of early-career apprentices, employees and managers.

Providers are well placed to bring their specialist expertise to the delivery of high quality outdoor learning, best realised when they work in close partnership with their participants.

Many providers also offer activity courses, open to individual recruitment, for example in holiday periods, providing further opportunities for young people and families to benefit.

Outdoor activity clubs

Outdoor activity clubs, community projects and environmental groups, all offer valuable opportunities to access recreational, environmental and adventure activities, including in a competitive context. Clubs provide an environment that encourages belonging to an outdoor community and progress towards high levels of performance and skill, whilst also contributing significantly to broader learning, personal growth and life-long recreational experiences. Community projects and environmental groups enable participation in a wide range of activities that meet local needs and engage with the local area, often conserving and improving local nature spaces.



Overseas visits and expeditions

Overseas visits and expeditions, whether provided by a school, commercial or voluntary organisations, offer extended opportunities for adventurous activities, advanced scientific field skills, community work, and heightened cultural and environmental awareness. Additionally, participants learn about working as part of a team, including how to manage risk, and they develop a greater tolerance for, and understanding of, the strengths and weaknesses they and their peers have.

Family members or peers

Family members or peers have often been influential in initiating and supporting a young person's engagement in outdoor activities, and this should not be forgotten in any holistic planning linked to increasing participation.

Awarding Bodies (ABs) and National Governing Bodies of sport (NGBs)

Awarding Bodies (ABs) and National Governing Bodies of sport (NGBs) provide a range of coaching, leadership and personal skills awards that enable individuals to gain recognition for their personal experience. Awards overlap with high quality learning outcomes and enable progression into employment (either paid or voluntary).

Green social prescribing

Green social prescribing is increasingly being used to support people's mental and physical health through nature-based interventions and activities. It includes 'green' (i.e. nature-based) and 'blue' (i.e. water) activities, often delivered through community projects and organisations.



Photo by Karl Midlane



1.2

# The benefits of outdoor learning

**An increasing volume of research evidence<sup>2-3</sup> supports the implementation of outdoor learning approaches, the quality of which has improved significantly since the publication of HQOL (2015).**

A summary of the evidence base supporting outdoor learning in the UK<sup>4</sup> found that nearly all interventions had a positive effect. Evidence supports positive impact on building social capital, fostering pride, belonging and community involvement<sup>5</sup>, while a growing number of Social Return on Investment Studies (SROI) are showing a significant return on investment in relation to wellbeing and preventing poor mental and physical health<sup>6</sup>, and positive learning outcomes<sup>7</sup>.

Outdoor learning has been shown to improve health and wellbeing, engage students and develop personal competencies<sup>8</sup>. Numerous studies demonstrate that experiences in nature promote learning, fostering nature connection leading to pro environmental behaviour and develop leadership, communication, problem solving and critical thinking skills<sup>9</sup>.

Academic performance has been shown to be positively affected by repeat outdoor learning experiences over multiple weeks<sup>10-11</sup>. Evidence of the long-term benefits of outdoor learning in school settings was established through the Natural Connections Demonstration Project which ran for four years with 125 schools in the south-west of England from 2012-2016.

Benefits for children included improved enjoyment of lessons, connection to nature, social skills, engagement with learning, health and wellbeing, behaviour and attainment. Significantly, the project also showed that there were benefits for teachers as well in terms of positive impacts on teaching practice, health and wellbeing, professional development, job satisfaction and teaching performance<sup>12</sup>.

**“The available evidence suggests that experiences of nature help children acquire some of the skills, attitudes, and behaviors most needed in the 21st century.”**

*Kuo et al (2019) Do Experiences With Nature Promote Learning? Relationship. Front. Psychol. 10:305. p.6*

While increasingly acknowledged as an approach to effective teaching and learning that is incorporated into formal education through national curricula, outdoor learning also offers an alternative pathway for those who might struggle with mainstream approaches, with improvements seen in behaviour, peer to peer relations, cooperation, enjoyment and student-teacher relations<sup>13</sup>.

Outdoor learning is also applicable to adult and family contexts. Research shows the value of outdoor settings to inspire curiosity and interest, and continuing engagement with the outdoors promotes healthy lifestyles, resilience and flexibility<sup>14</sup>.

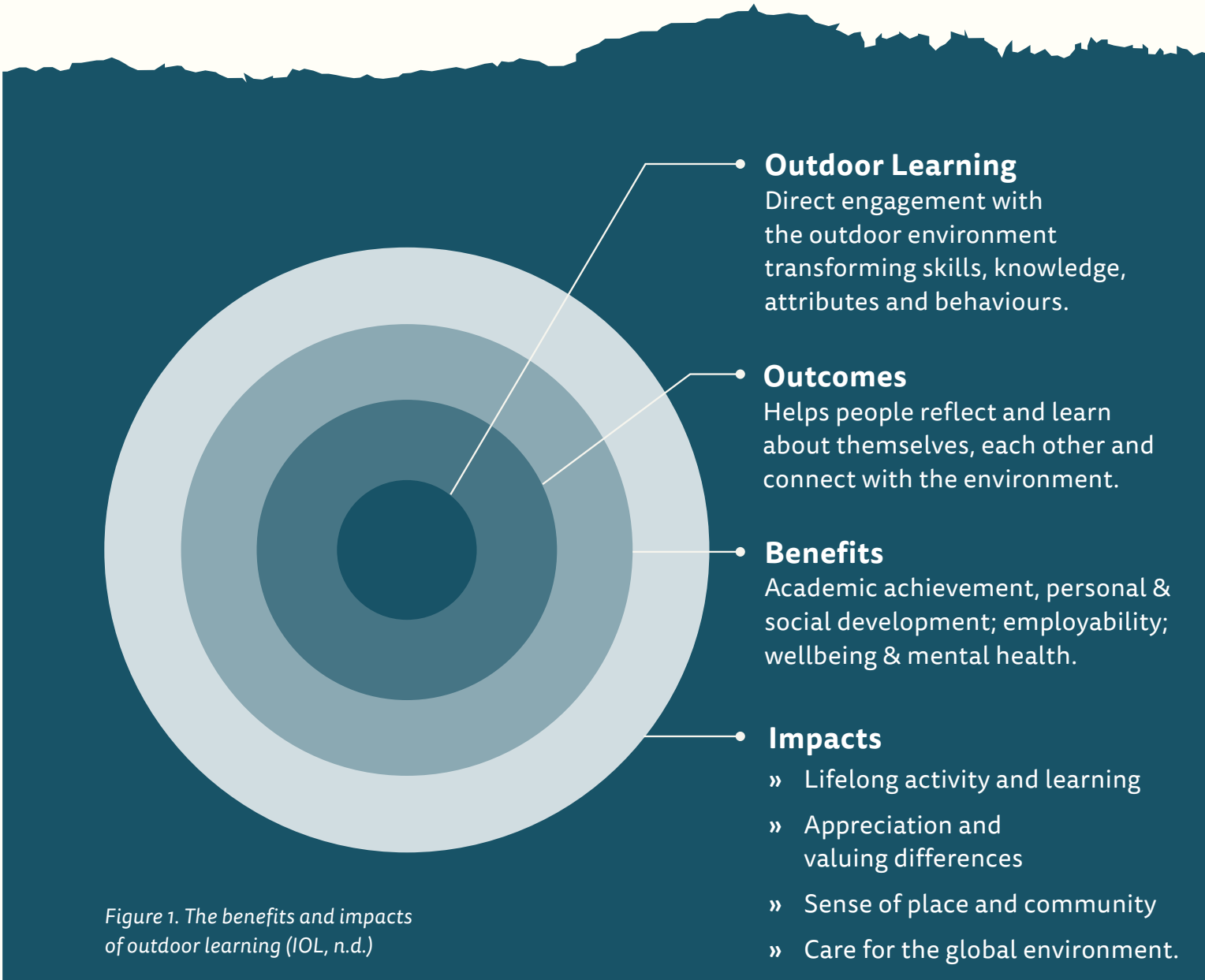
Family projects, where parents or carers and their children engage together in social care interventions offer the potential to improve family resilience and improve school engagement<sup>15</sup>.

There is significant qualitative research supporting the benefits of residential<sup>16-17-18</sup>, overseas expeditions<sup>19-20</sup> and sail training<sup>21</sup>. Outdoor based approaches to therapy also have a growing evidence base<sup>22</sup>.

The benefits of outdoor learning can also be framed in terms of the outcomes and longer-term impacts that high quality practice leads to (see 2.4).

**“...it is time to take nature seriously as a resource for learning and development. It is time to bring nature and nature-based pedagogy into formal education – to expand existing, isolated efforts into increasingly mainstream practices.”**

*Kuo et al (2019) Do Experiences With Nature Promote Learning? Relationship. Front. Psychol. 10:305. p.6*





1.3

# The context for outdoor learning

Outdoor learning is always influenced by a number of key agendas that drive policy and practice:

- » Increasing numbers of children with mental health disorders<sup>23</sup> and significant percentages of the adult population either overweight or obese<sup>24</sup>.
- » Growing health inequalities and child poverty<sup>25</sup>.
- » Increased anxiety levels, post Covid, in children and adults, with overall wellbeing ratings declining across all measures<sup>26</sup>.
- » Inequitable access to and success in education<sup>27</sup>.
- » Conflicts around the world leading to community-level challenges<sup>28</sup>, demanding empathy and understanding to promote cohesion and integration.
- » Digital technologies and artificial intelligence changing the world of education and employment<sup>29</sup>.

- » Accelerating biodiversity loss and climate change<sup>30</sup>.
  - » Increasing urbanisation, time spent indoors and a loss of 'nature connection'<sup>31</sup>.
  - » Inequitable access to the outdoors<sup>32</sup> and outdoor learning<sup>33</sup>.
- For individuals and groups, these challenges have meaning at four levels: intrapersonal, interpersonal, societal and global (**figure 2**). Outdoor learning interventions on their own cannot address all of these, but with its specific focus on the natural environment, and along with education, health, the arts, youth work and sports-based approaches, they can contribute to them by helping children, young people and adults to thrive<sup>34</sup>. Table 1 connects the potential benefits with the outcomes of high quality outdoor learning (see **Section 2.4**).

4 Levels of learning challenges

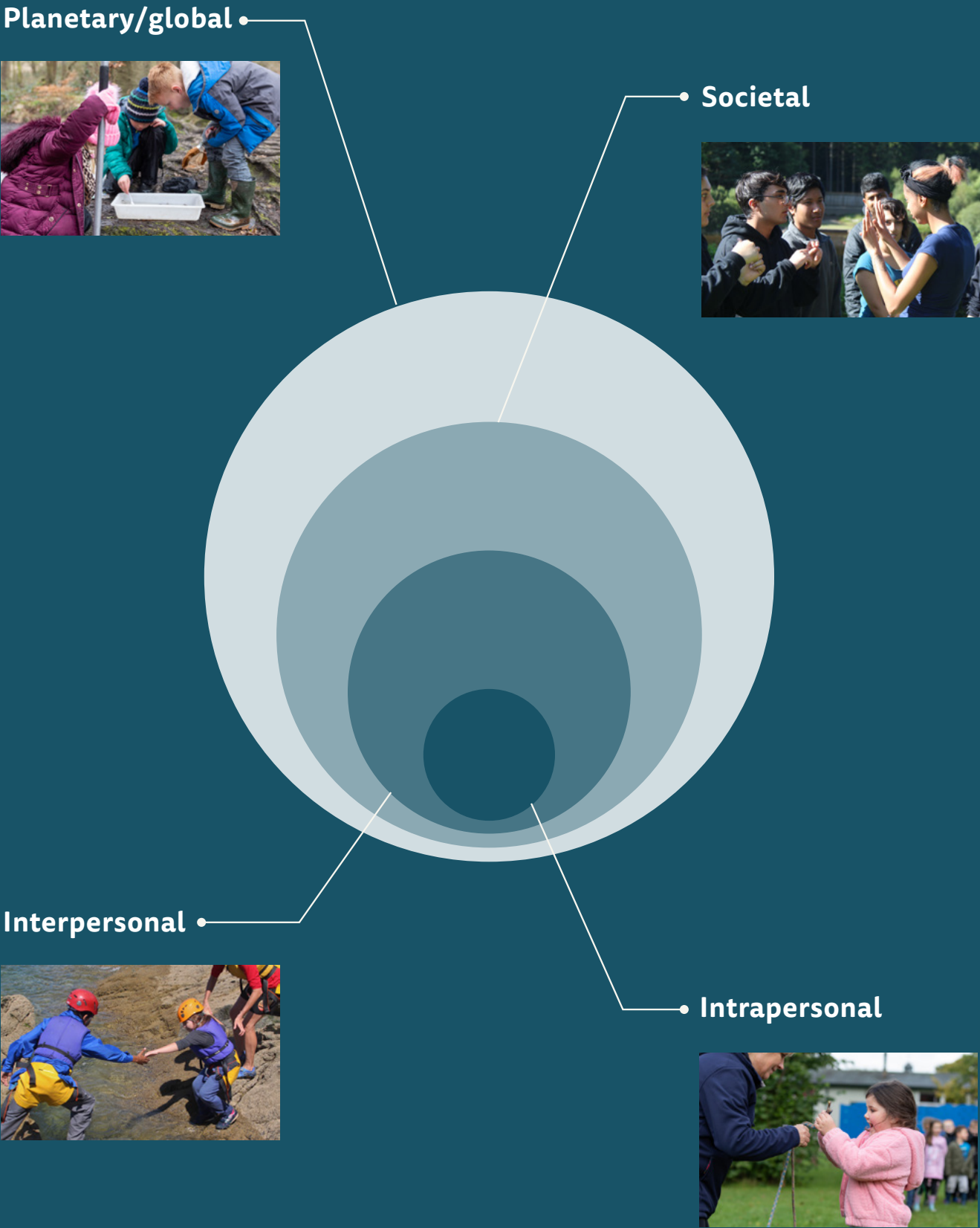


Figure 2. The context of outdoor learning  
Based on Hannon, V. (2017) Thrive. London; Innovation Unit



At an intrapersonal level, participants can:

- » Become aware of their strengths, where they can develop, and the choices available to them. (Outcomes 2, 10)
- » Develop personal responsibility for their health and wellbeing and recognise how they can achieve this through time spent in the natural environment. (Outcome 1)
- » Learn to be comfortable in the outdoors. (Outcome 6)
- » Seek encounters with nature for enjoyment, recreation and health. (Outcomes 1,4,9)
- » Gain the knowledge and skills to safely and enjoyably explore nature while minimising impact. (Outcomes 4,6)
- » Gain a sense of self through recognising their place in the world. (Outcome 7)

At an interpersonal level, participants can:

- » Gain the skills to develop effective relationships in diverse, ageing and technologised societies. (Outcomes 2,8)
- » Understand and value interrelatedness between humans and nature. (Outcome 3)
- » Develop the skills associated with effective communication, teamwork and leadership. (Outcomes 2,8)

At a societal level, participants can:

- » Become equipped to navigate an uncertain and changing landscape of work. (Outcomes 7,8,9,10)
- » Be prepared to participate effectively in their community and more widely. (Outcomes 9,10)
- » Develop an understanding and sense of place from both personal experience and academic investigation. (Outcome 3)
- » Engage with and develop connections to community and place. (Outcomes 5,9)

At a global level, participants can:

- » Learn to live sustainably within the Earth’s resources, taking care of its ecosystem and biodiversity. (Outcome 3)
- » Develop an emotional connection with the Earth and all living things. (Outcome 3)
- » Maintain sustainable environmental beliefs and practices informed by principles of ecology, critical thought, judgement and action. (Outcome 3)
- » Recognise, understand and embrace the differences and the similarities in different cultures and peoples (Outcomes 2,10)

Table 1. The potential outcomes of high quality outdoor learning



## 1.4

# Outdoor learning and the Sustainable Development Goals

The Global Goals for Sustainable Development (known as the Sustainable Development Goals, or SDGs) form part of Agenda 2030, adopted by all 193 member states of the United Nations in 2015. Outdoor learning approaches can contribute towards meeting the goals in a number of ways through both policy and practice<sup>35</sup>.



## 1.5

# The relationship between outdoor learning and outdoor recreation

**Outdoor recreation (OR) – which can lead to informal learning – can be the main reason that many people access the outdoors beyond school<sup>36 37</sup>.**

In the UK, outdoor recreation is often seen as distinct from outdoor learning and is generally regarded as activity undertaken voluntarily for relaxation or pleasure. While outdoor recreation for some involves more 'extreme' activities with a higher degree of objective risk, it also includes a wide range of outdoor activities that are traditionally used in facilitated outdoor learning contexts e.g. walking, climbing, high ropes courses, mountain biking and paddle sports. The coaching, guiding or facilitating of these experiences forms a significant part of the outdoor recreation economy, and many practitioners work in both recreational and facilitated settings, often introducing participants to lifelong participation. Other outdoor activities used in more informal contexts, such as gardening and nature watching, are also significant recreational pastimes which can be facilitated with the help of community volunteers, coaches and guides. There is, therefore, a clear link between learning and recreation that provides opportunities for practitioners to encourage and foster connections for their participants that enable greater access to the outdoors for its benefits.



## Part 2

# Understanding high quality outdoor learning

Within the outdoor sector there are multiple interpretations of quality, reflected in the range of available frameworks, qualifications, accreditations and awards. Ideas of quality can vary depending on a wide number of factors that relate to what is being assessed (e.g., a product, an experience, a facility, a service, etc.), expectations, value for money and the meeting of needs.

Any assessment of quality in outdoor learning contexts is often a compound of many different feelings, observations and experiences from before, during and after the experience itself. The structures in place that lead to effective outdoor learning experiences, including the pre-programme needs analysis, the delivery of the experiences and the outcomes achieved as a result all play a part. Perceptions of quality also reflect the cultural and societal expectations that are current at the time.

Different groups of people make quality judgements about outdoor learning practice.

Beyond the providers' own in-house quality systems, there may also be judgments being made by people involved in formal staff training and assessment, performance management or accreditation inspections, funders (or whoever is paying for or commissioning the service, including parents) and government agencies. Activities that happen in the public eye are also subject to judgement from other practitioners, recreational participants and casual passers-by.

Also passing judgment are the participants themselves, and the accompanying adults/leaders if the participants are a group. Accordingly, there are different perspectives gained from experiencing and /or observing as a participant (potentially 'in the moment', experiencing something and supported by the facilitator), as an observer (with a different view that may enable them to see certain things that the participant is not consciously aware of), and, beyond that, as an observer with expert knowledge who will see an additional layer of practice evidence. However, for non-expert observers, it is important to recognise the difficulties that exist in trying to assess quality in a field in which they themselves are not an expert.



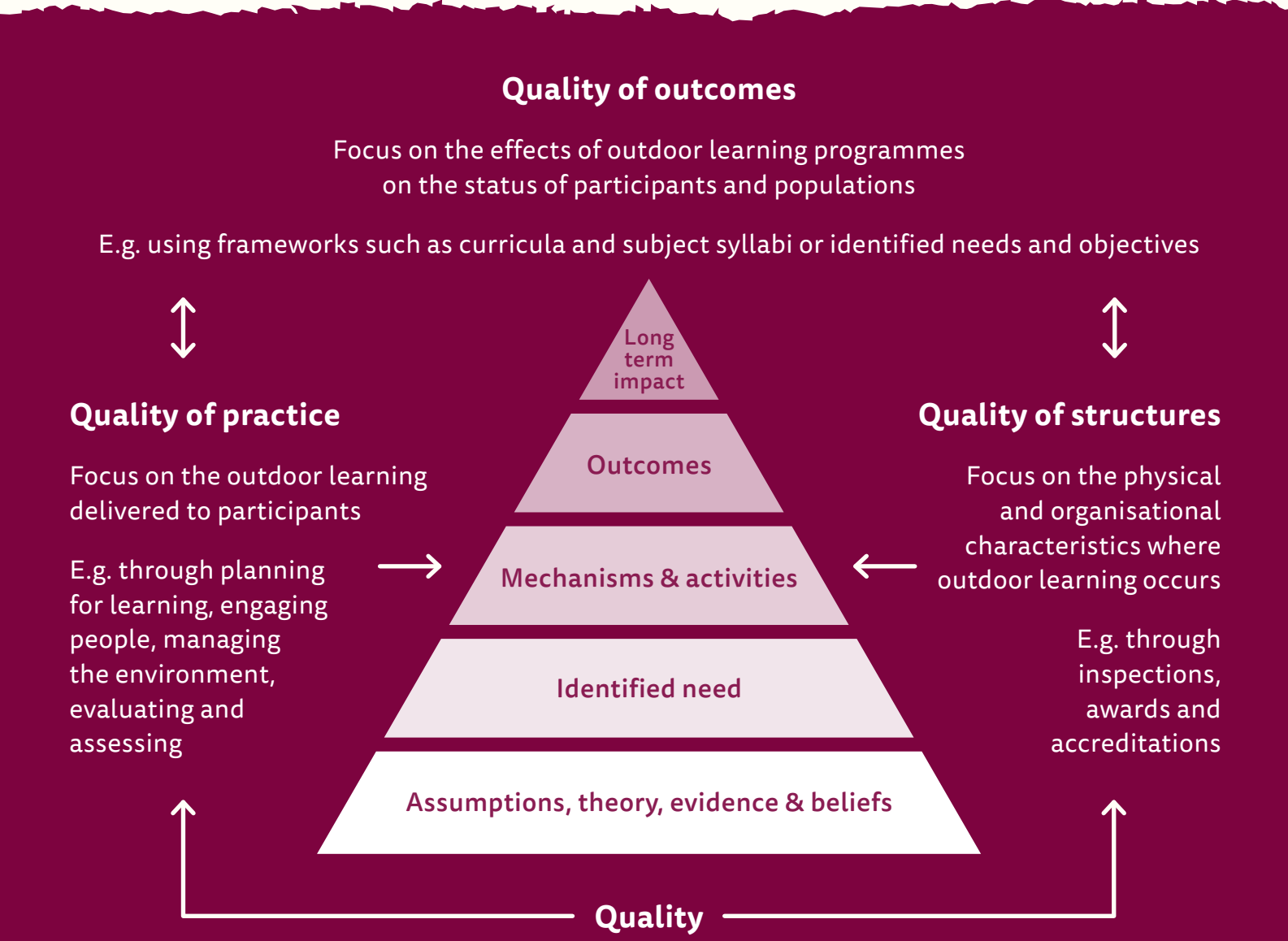
Photo by Karl Midlane



# 2.1

## A model for understanding quality

In this guide, overall quality is seen as a blend of quality of structures (the physical and organisational characteristics of the provision), practice (what is delivered to the participants) and outcomes (the effects the programme has), all of which can be connected by a ‘theory of change’ that makes clear the link between what is delivered, the context in which the learning is situated, and the intended outcomes (**Figure 3**)<sup>38</sup>.



# 2.2

## Underpinning structures

The physical and organisational characteristics of organisations that deliver high quality outdoor learning are integral to effective practice and achieving successful outcomes. A shared vision, underpinned by organisational values and beliefs provides the platform for a supportive and enabling culture with effective policies and procedures.

Many of the underlying structures can be assessed through existing externally accredited quality schemes that are appropriate to a particular learning setting.

Health and safety law and statutory schemes, such as the **UK’s Adventure Activity Licensing Authority (AALA)** inspections of some adventurous activities for children, are supplemented by a range of externally assessed voluntary accreditations. These cover broadly similar areas of provision including health and safety policies and procedures, emergency procedures, staff competence, safeguarding, accommodation and transport (where appropriate) and data protection. Some schemes, but not all and to varying degrees, also assess teaching and learning.

In addition, National Governing Body qualifications provide external assessment of practitioner competence within specific activities, and some also offer provider approval.

**Examples of UK voluntary quality approval schemes:**

- » AdventureMark
- » Learning Outside the Classroom (LOTC) Quality Badge
- » LOTC Mark
- » AHOEC Gold
- » Forest School Association Recognised Provider
- » Green Care Quality Mark
- » BAPA
- » British Standard BS8848
- » RYA



# 2.3 Practice

Outdoor learning can be interpreted in many ways, but in its broadest sense is as an umbrella term that incorporates numerous approaches. An alternative, and more specific way of defining it is as either a process or an outcome, both of which are interrelated. Certain aspects of provision that can be controlled and influenced by practitioners and providers bind the activities themselves together. By concentrating on the quality of practice the intended outcomes are far more likely to be achieved than by focusing solely on the outcomes.

The IOL **Guide to High Quality Outdoor Learning 2025** identifies the elements of good practice and provides a guide to self-assessment and improvement for practitioners and providers.

# 2.4 Outcomes

Whether the outcomes of high quality outdoor learning are targeted and specific, or more open ended, they provide a focus for activities and experiences that can also frame assessment and evaluation processes.

**Figure 4** lists ten outcomes of high quality outdoor learning.

Desired outcomes can be developed in a variety of ways. They may be co-generated by the provider and participants, by the provider themselves, by a funder or service commissioner or be entirely generated by the participants themselves. They can simply reflect a known characteristic of the group that there is a desire to develop (e.g. 'teamwork') or be part of an outcomes framework that a particular organisation uses.





**In providing high quality outdoor learning organisations, groups and individuals need to be clear about their intended outcomes and their wider vision for outdoor learning.**

When providers and practitioners are delivering progressive high quality outdoor learning, they and other observers will see participants who are:

- 1.** Learning to appreciate the benefits of physical fitness and the lifelong value of participation in healthy active leisure activities.
- 2.** Developing their self-awareness and social skills, and their appreciation of the contributions and achievements of themselves and of others.
- 3.** Becoming receptive to the natural environment and understand the importance of conservation and pro environmental behaviour.
- 4.** Developing a positive attitude to challenge, learning and adventure.
- 5.** Developing personal confidence and character through taking on challenges and achieving success.
- 6.** Acquiring and developing a range of skills and knowledge as a result of, and in support of, their participation in outdoor activities, recreation and exploration.
- 7.** Demonstrating increased initiative, self-reliance, responsibility, perseverance, tenacity and commitment.
- 8.** Developing and extending their key skills of communication, problem-solving, leadership and teamwork.
- 9.** Displaying an increased motivation and appetite for learning that is contributing to raised levels of achievement and progress in other aspects of their development.
- 10.** Broadening their horizons and becoming aware of a wider range of recreation and employment opportunities and life chances, life choices and lifestyles.



Photo by Karl Midlane

Figure 4. Ten outcomes of high quality outdoor learning.



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