

Outdoor Learning Hubs Project Developments

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1. Impacts Summary

The Central OL Research Hub (CRH), impacts so far:

- Support for 5 existing and several emerging regional hubs
- At least six OL providers working with researchers on small scale studies to inform practice
- A funding proposal to develop applied research workshops for the regional hubs to offer via IOL regional events
- A literature review conducted by the central hub research coordinator, Carrie Hedges, to provide the evidence base for a campaign to promote OL to Scottish schools organised by members of the Scottish regional hub
- A research ask to members of the regional hubs to support the development of national strategy and OL's contribution to the Natural England progression model for outdoor experiences for all
- The identification of data sets held by providers and available for researchers
- The identification of unpublished research and evaluation reports that can be shared more widely
- The ongoing monitoring of new research findings for dissemination

Intended outputs of the 'proof of concept' phase:

Objectives:

- Offer more direction for hubs and hub conveners, and develop hub support protocols
- Formulate plans to encourage submission of unpublished research
- Target two hub counties for further detailed review of research and practitioner needs

Output objectives from the Proof of Concept and the Project:

- Report(s) on gaps in evidence and priority areas
- Results of the hub progression exercise
- Targeting conferences for presentation (i.e. Scotland ResearchED conference, September 2018; OL Sector National Conference, November 2018)
- Begin development of the outdoor learning toolkit for practitioners

2. Introduction

The Outdoor Learning Regional Hubs Project was developed in 2017 and continues to develop in response to the Government's 25-year Environment Plan and the 2022 Campaign - to enable a coherent and progressive nature connection for all school-aged children by 2022. The project supports the Plan and the Campaign by bringing together practitioners and researchers at the local level to collaborate, provide evidence, and highlight priorities for action-research and evaluation to support the delivery of high quality, coherent and progressive outdoor learning experiences.

The outdoor learning regional hubs project is funded by the Institute of Outdoor Learning (IOL) through the University of Cumbria (UoC) and steered by IOL, University of Cumbria, Natural England, the Council for Learning Outside the Classroom (CLOtC), and Historic England (together: the Sector Working Group (SWG)). The Central Outdoor Learning Research Hub (CRH) is led at UoC by Dr Chris Loynes and administered by the research coordinator, Carrie Hedges, and extends from the Strategic Research Group for Learning in the Natural Environment (SRG for LiNE).

Convening of the research hubs and webpages are administered through IOL. The regional hubs are autonomous and guided by these five aims:

- Building links between local research-practice communities
- Capturing the scope of research and delivery projects in their area

- Creating plans for supporting amplification of delivery in areas of national priority (such as school based OL)
- Creating plans to support evidence gathering in areas of national priority (such as understanding the role of nature connection in delivering outcomes)
- Disseminating information about evidence and good practice within their hub area, among the network of pilot hubs and with the SRG LINE and SWG.

The aims of the Central Outdoor Learning Research Hub are:

- To gather the evidence required for the Proof of Concept for the outdoor learning research hub project (see section 2: *Proof of Concept*), and
- Identify national and local research priorities by ascertaining gaps in the current evidence base and feeding these back out to the SRG, SWG and regional hubs (see section 3: *Evidence Gathering*)

3. Proof of Concept

The Proof-of-Concept began in November 2017 and aims to:

1. Test the hubs development, network processes and framework as summarised above
2. Explore the possibility of testing the NE progression model typology and development
3. Test the project formulation remit by identifying data held within organisations and support development of these for further research (i.e. through Master's degree students)
4. Support the development of local priorities for action-research

It aims to produce:

- Feedback on the tests
- Typologies for an outdoor learning toolkit (to be administered through IOL webpages)
- Current field overview and research gaps emerging from review work
- Understanding of gaps in provision for the field

4. Evidence gathering

To fulfil the project aims, the objectives of the CRH are to:

- Aggregate published and unpublished OL research within the UK and congruent with UK interests
- Identify local priority areas for action-research development

These objectives drive the priorities and workflow of the CRH. To initiate these and provide evidence for the Proof-of-Concept, three evidence gathering areas have been developed:

- collating unpublished and previously unknown evidence from individuals and represented organisations initiated through the regional hubs
- the aggregation of UK-wide OL research and evaluation, and
- the development of local hub progression models

These are discussed below.

4.1. Collating unpublished evidence from individuals and represented organisations through the regional hubs

Hubs will and are being asked to provide information on known unpublished reports and data being gathered or held within their organisation. These will be collated into a database held at the CRH, for (where applicable) addition in CRH outputs and dissemination to stimulate future research and evaluation projects.

4.2. Aggregating OL research and evaluation

The evidence gathering strategy includes targeting both published peer-reviewed evidence following the seminal report by Rickensen et al. (2004), and unpublished completed evaluations (no date limitations) that support hub and national strategy developments. Unpublished evaluations include Master's and PhD level theses, studies developed by organisations and individuals approached via the hubs network (as above), and those targeted by the central research hub (i.e. Universities, the Scouting Association, etc.). Information on unpublished work will be held in a database at the CRH and reviews will be collated from published and unpublished research supporting research hub project developments and outputs.

4.3. Developing local hub progression models

To support the identification of local priorities for action-research, the CRH will support regional hubs to identify priority areas through exploration of regional informal, non-formal and formal OL opportunities. Hub groups will be encouraged to consider nature connection, personal and social development, and active and healthy lifestyles within their region under three key areas: *capacity*, *reach*, and *progression*. The output will be a local progression built on the outlook, experience, and expertise personal to each region. The resulting progressions will support the targeting and development of important local action-research, and support the national agenda by highlighting unknown or over-looked priority areas, stimulating broader priority research strategies and evaluation of OL provision in the UK.

The CRH will support the regional hubs to develop a local progression model by providing the framework, provision and project stimulation required. There will be an initial project presentation and discussion with each hub group, with follow-up support as necessary. In the style of the hubs project, although a framework will be provided, the development of local themes and final progression will be autonomous. During and following progression development, and assisted by the hubs, the CRH aims to provide review of research and evaluation of highlighted priority areas. The CRH will then support hub groups to develop action-research as identified within the local progression models and guided by national research priorities.

5. Initial hub developments

5.1. Overview

In 2017 three local hubs were autonomously developed, one in Scotland and three in England (northwest, southwest and southeast). In 2018 one new hub is about to begin convening in Northeast England, and a hub North Wales is in development.

- Scottish hub – Originally convened by Natalie White, in process of changing hands
 - Two hub meetings so far, one in planning
- Northwest hub - convened by Dr Heather Prince at the University of Cumbria
 - Two hub meetings so far
 - 24 and 31 attendees
- Southwest hub - convened by Sue Waite, now Alun Morgan and Rowena Passy
 - One hub meeting so far, a further one in planning

- Southeast hub – convened by Sarah O'Malley
 - Two hub meetings so far
 - 12 and 9 attendees
- Northeast hub – in development
 - First meeting planned for early summer 2018

Although the hubs are currently named by the larger regions (i.e. 'Scottish hub' for the whole of Scotland, 'northwest' for the whole of northwest England, etc.), regional hubs may prefer to break-down the hub groups in each region to better encompass the quality of 'local' when identifying local priorities, and help reduce over-subscription in (e.g.) the Northwest hub. The Scottish and, in many ways, the Southeast hub are identifying as centrally driven 'steering hubs', where they can then plan to organise more localised meetings or practitioner-researcher conferences within the region. From feedback at the Northwest meeting it was also apparent there may be other people willing to run smaller hubs in their local regions (i.e. Yorkshire).

The CRH may move to encourage the reduction of area covered by each hub as the project moves forward and the local progressions begin development.

5.2. Hub network development

The locally autonomous nature of the hubs project has seen them develop in a variety of ways. In order to objectively gauge the scope of practitioners and researchers wanting to take part in the project and gain an understanding of the drivers behind the need for practitioner-researcher collaboration, at these initial stages there has been minimal interference and although support has been offered it was limited in its prescribed direction. It is interesting to note the differences in style of convening, group size, affiliations and outlook of the hub participants and coordinators.

Initial contact has generally been made by the proposing hub convener(s) via either Fiona Exon at IOL or Chris Loynes for guidance for advertising and setting up the first hub meeting. Guidance is then offered on locating a suitable meeting area and how to advertise the meeting. The CRH research coordinator has attended meetings since November (the second northwest meeting and the first southeast meeting) to offer discussion guidance and to describe the place of the hub within the larger project.

Notable differences between the hubs have been: the different frequencies of hub meetings, the opportunities being harnessed to bring together other OL and research working groups or to use the hub as a conduit within a wider plan (e.g. in the Southwest), and the development of some groups as primarily steering groups of a larger region.

5.3. Hub participants

A mixture of researchers and practitioners have attended the hub meetings and several organisations have been represented. For example, from the previous two Northwest and Southeast meetings, 59% were academics from a range of universities within and outside the catchment areas, the local authority was represented at two meetings alongside local project groups and primary school teachers (although these were also post-graduate students). Several youth organisations and a number of local outdoor trusts had representations and a representative from the local wildlife trust also attended the Southeast meeting.

6. Moving forward – priorities, opportunities and developments

As the Proof of Concept moves forward, work-plans may be adjusted and new ideas trialled in keeping with the aims of the Project. So far identified, the CRH will look to:

- Offer more direction for hubs and hub conveners, and develop hub support protocols
- Formulate plans to encourage submission of unpublished research
- Target two hub counties for further detailed review of research and practitioner needs

There will also be several outputs provided from the Proof of Concept and the Project:

- Report(s) on gaps in evidence and priority areas
- Results of the hub progression exercise
- Targeting conferences for presentation (i.e. Scotland ResearchED conference, September 2018; OL Sector National Conference, November 2018)
- Begin development of the outdoor learning toolkit for practitioners

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