

YMCA North Tyneside is extremely grateful to the Niveveh Trust for a grant that enabled us to give young people the opportunity to experience the countryside. Following is a summary of the project and the learning outcomes for the participants.

Context:- The young people we focused on were aged between 11 to 18 years old and all live in areas of high levels of social deprivation. Due to austerity, local youth and community have been decimated, leaving many young people to congregate on the streets. Our street based youth workers were able to build relationships with the young people and seek to engage them in positive activities.

It became apparent that although North Tyneside has such close proximity to the beautiful Northumberland countryside, very few of the young people had actually visited the area and without exception, none of them had been to Hadrian's Wall. To this end and with lengthy conversations with the young people, it was decided that we should explore the possibility of walking a section of the Wall as well as spending a weekend sleeping out under the stars. It was also agreed that we would spend a day undertaking some conversation work at the YMCA centre at Patterdale in the Lake District.

Hadrian's Wall Trek;- It is true to say that there were some challenges in trying to overcome young people's negative perceptions of the outdoors and a great deal of work was undertaken to reassure and involve them with the planning and preparation for the walk. Questions such as 'I have never walked that far before' and 'I haven't got any proper walking boots' were issues that had to be addressed.

The walk itself proved to a massive success. The weather was ideal and throughout the 12-mile trek, it was heartening to see the young people all really enjoying the experience, taking photos on their mobile phones and constantly asking questions about the various Roman sites along the way. Despite a lot of moans and groans of 'how much further' the walk ended with some very tired legs and blisters. By the time the coach arrived back in North Tyneside, it was such a pleasure to hear the young people thank the youth workers and express how much they enjoyed the day. Many of the group also asked 'when can we go again!'

Conversation weekend:- Given the success of the Hadrian's Wall Walk, all of the young people who took part volunteered to undertake a day's conservation work in the Lake District. With the help of forestry volunteers, the young people learnt about carrying out essential habitat management tasks for the benefit of local wildlife as well as helping with coppicing, scrub clearance and fencing etc. Again, this was an amazing experience for the group and all had a wonderful time.

We also combined this with an opportunity to experience the countryside by having a night sleeping under the stars. This was a real experience for the young people, taking them right out of their comfort zone. As with the walk, the main aim of these challenges were to enable the young people to see the world around them, to look up and appreciate a blue sky or a dark cloud and understand that learning occurs everywhere, inside and outside.

What was achieved through the project:- Throughout the project, we constantly monitored young peoples learning and observations. This was done through both informal conversations and more formal group feedback sessions. We also received comments from some of the young peoples parents. After compiling all of this feedback, we are confident that the following outcomes have been achieved. The young people have:-

- developed reflective and inquisitive thinking along with problem-solving approaches in 'real' situations
- Broken down negative perceptions of the countryside.
- Learnt new survival skills and gained confidence.
- developed resilience and adaptability in very different circumstances
- become more able to identify hazards and risks
- developed appreciation and respect for nature and all that is living
- developed an understanding of how we can look after our environment
- developed self-awareness and self-esteem
- developed collaborative-working and communication skills
- had positive health benefits – both physically and mentally
- loved the outdoors, had fun and would like to do similar things in the future.

Finally, with the kind support from the Niveveh Trust, YMCA North Tyneside has helped to provide a rich learning environment; one that has allowed our young people to enjoy learning, to discover along the way and appreciate the beautiful Northumberland countryside that is on the door step.

This experience has certainly inspired the young people to want to be involved in future initiatives as well as reminding the YMCA that introducing young people to the countryside can be so important, and for many, life changing.