

Voluntary and Community Organisations in Cumbria: Assets for Young People's Decision-Making?

A report commissioned by Hello Future

HASKE

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Cumbria Collaborative
Outreach Programme

Hello Future have funded a number of research projects. Through the projects we aim to enable our partnership and wider stakeholders to learn more about our target Cumbrian learner cohort. Research projects are developed to capture 'learner voice', inform our evolving Theory of Change and to increasingly improve the effectiveness of our outreach interventions.



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The report authors are Dr Tom Grimwood, Vicki Goodwin and Dr Meaghan Grabrovaz, October 2020.

1 Introduction

1.1 Overview

Hello Future forms part of the Uni Connect programme (previously known as the National Collaborative Outreach Programme until January 2020), funded by the Office for Students. The programme aims to drive rapid progress towards achieving the Government's goals to double the proportion of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds in Higher Education (HE) by 2020, increase by 20 per cent the number of students in HE from ethnic minority groups and address the under-representation of young men from disadvantaged backgrounds. Hello Future is a partnership of local universities, colleges and employers who are committed to improving access to HE for young people in Cumbria.

Previous reports commissioned by Hello Future (see HASKE 2020) have argued that an asset-based approach to widening participation is a key strategy for improving access and participation in higher education in Cumbria. In previous work this has been explored from the perspective of schools and outreach officers. This report seeks to develop the asset-based approach to widening participation and outreach by examining the roles of voluntary organisations – sports, arts, scouting and so on – which often form key assets for young people's decision-making regarding future careers.

Currently, very little resource or training exists for such organisations in this specific context. The aims of this research are, then, to:

- Map the organisations available to young people in different areas of Cumbria (building from the work HASKE have already done on what constitutes “the rural” within the Cumbrian context).
- Identify how organisations view their own roles in young people's potential journey to Higher Education; how their roles constitutes assets for outreach programmes to engage with; and in what ways they “gate” these assets to particular groups of young people (building on the work HASKE have done on widening participation, cultural capital and asset-based approaches).

The aim of this report is:

- To articulate the ways in which VCOs can be seen as assets for FE and HE outreach, by
 - Demonstrating the variation in VCO types and activities across Cumbria;
 - Articulating the different ways in which they engage with young people in general, and in discussions about their potential future decisions in particular;
- To identify the ways in which these assets are gated, in order to inform any potential interventions from outreach teams

1.2 Assets and Gated Assets

The key to this research is the notion of “gated assets” which was first presented in the Hello Future report, *An asset-based approach to Widening Participation for young people in Cumbria* (2020). This research suggested that situating outreach within the context of social and cultural capital allows differences (rather than deficits) to

be identified in particular areas. This can then inform an asset-based approach to widening participation which recognises specific interfaces and resources that provide capabilities for HE entry. As such, assets exist which are not typically identified as such from the perspective of HE. Yet, such assets are able to provide a range of strengths such as emotional intelligence and resilience, personal qualities and values, team work and communication skills, and cultural competences.

However, while mapping assets is important for understanding the potential resources young people have for making the transition to Higher Education, assets are always “gated” in some sense: that is, they are open to certain identified traits of individuals, or wider demographics, and closed to others. Unlike a blanket “capabilities” approach, understanding assets (both personal and institutional) also requires identifying the ways in which assets can be accessed, encouraged or blocked. As a result, it is important to not only map the existing assets within a given area, but also to understand the various “gates” within these assets that affect who can draw upon them.

Such “gates” are not necessarily upheld by individuals, nor are they always intentionally exclusive. Indeed, a gate can be as simple as an admission fee, or the location of a particular asset being too distant for some to reach; likewise, it may be a more deliberate targeting of certain individuals over others. In each case, the gate operates as a filter which enables some to utilise the asset, and not others. There is no moral judgement in identifying these gates; but it is important that their role in the shaping of potential assets is understood.

This report informs the model of asset-based approaches to widening participation by detailing how these “gates” work in practice: how they are formed within each organisation, and how understanding this gating will support more bespoke and effective outreach interventions.

2 Methodology

Data collection consisted of two exercises. The first (Section 3 below) was a scoping review which mapped the VCOs in Cumbria that could be considered as assets, or potential assets, to young people's thinking and decision-making about their future options. The second data collection exercise involved semi-structured interviews with a sample of VCOs identified through the mapping exercise detailed above (Section 4 below). The interviews sought to identify:

- how organisations view their own roles in young people's potential journey to HE;
- how their roles constitutes assets for outreach programmes to engage with;
- the ways in which assets are "gated", either implicitly or explicitly, to filter participation and engagement.

Purposive sampling of VCOs identified in the mapping exercise was used to select a proportionally consistent range of VCOs by type in each area of Cumbria to invite for interview. Additional VCOs to ensure a good coverage of type and geography were targeted using a snowball approach (for example, a contact in a regional VCO membership organisation brokered introductions to relevant VCOs). Military, scouting and guiding organisations were not targeted for interview as much data regarding their functioning as assets was accessible from their websites.

In total, interviews with 14 VCOs and one VCO umbrella organisation were conducted: 8 from general youth clubs and youth work, 5 from arts and culture groups, and 2 from sports and physical activity organisations. Of these, 4 operated in within West Cumbria, 3 in Barrow-in-Furness, 2 in Carlisle, 1 in Eden, and 4 Cumbria-wide. Interviews were conducted using Microsoft Teams and in two cases by telephone. Interviews were recorded with participant permission and in accordance with the conditions of the University of Cumbria Ethics Approval. A discussion guide was used to guide interviews (Appendix 2). Interviews were transcribed and analysed thematically using NVivo 12 Plus.

3 Mapping VCOs in Cumbria

3.1 Overview

The findings from the mapping of VCOs across Cumbria is presented in Appendix One. The data to inform this mapping is taken from a range of sources about different types of VCOs:

- Data from Third Sector Trends Study (Northern Rock Foundation, 2010; Community Foundation, 2020)
- [Active Cumbria](#)
- Online and social media searches by activity type and area
- [Cumbria Council for Voluntary Services \(CVS\)](#) – an umbrella organisation supporting the third sector groups throughout Cumbria. The CVS has networks of thematically grouped member organisations including: Arts and Culture; Sport and Physical Activity; Children and Young People, and this helped identify a range of voluntary organisations.
- Registered third sector organisations can be found via their official regulators, such as: [Charity Commission](#), [Office of the Regulator of Community Interest Companies](#). Sports Clubs can register either as a community amateur sports club (CASC) or as a charity.

Across Cumbria, nearly 450 types of activities delivered by VCOs were identified. For the purposes of the exercise, the review coded the region into seven areas:

1	Carlisle and area
2	Eden
3	West Cumbria
4	South Lakes
5	Barrow and Furness
6	North Lakes (Keswick and Cockerthwaite)
7	Cumbria Wide

3.2 Summary Findings

The mapping documents the wide variations in VCO activities. Analysis suggested that VCOs delivering activities to young people can be categorised into four main groups. These groupings reflect the differences in funding, activities and staffing which can affect young people's access and engagement which, in turn, has implications for both how VCOs act as an asset for young people in terms of their decision-making, and how the role of VCOs might act as assets for outreach programmes to engage with. These differences are outlined below in Table 1 below.

<p>Organisations where the activity is the main purpose of the organisation, often referred to as clubs. (Inc. Arts and Culture, Sport and Physical Activity, and Environmental groups)</p>	<p>This type of VCO may be run mainly by volunteers, who often themselves participate or have participated in the activity offered. They may or may not seek funding to support aspects of their programme, facilities and/or equipment but even without funding may be able to continue to operate running on volunteer time and membership/fees. This category in Cumbria includes football clubs, boxing clubs, amateur dramatic and musical theatre groups, art groups, Young Farmers Clubs, angling and sea-angling, athletics, badminton, cricket, croquet, cycling, gymnastics, hockey, netball, rugby, running, canoeing, choirs, pony clubs, snow-sports, squash and racket ball, swimming, tennis, and taekwondo.</p>
<p>Organisations where the main purpose is youth work and the activities are an engagement or development tool.</p>	<p>This category covers youth clubs and youth projects. The main focus is to support young people in their personal and social development and activities may be offered as an engagement tool, or as a development opportunity, or both. The purpose of youth work is defined by the National Youth Agency as: “a distinct educational process adapted across a variety of settings to support a young person’s personal, social and educational development.” (National Youth Agency, 2020). Most VCOs in this category rely on funding to deliver their work, will often have paid staff, or a mix of paid staff and volunteers. The paid staff are more likely to be trained and qualified youth workers (or similar professionals, for example, teaching backgrounds).</p>
<p>Scouting and guiding groups which typically focus on both young people and community aspects.</p>	<p>This includes Scouts and Girlguiding but other ‘scout-like’ organisations also exist. Some of these have a religious association e.g. Girls Brigade England and Wales and Boys Brigade. Scouts aim to provide young people with ‘skills for life while making a positive impact on society’ (Scouts, 2020) and similarly, Girlguiding’s mission is to ‘empower girls to find their voice, inspiring them to discover the best in themselves and to make a positive difference in their community’ (Girlguiding, 2020).</p>
<p>Military and uniformed service organisations with youth sections.</p>	<p>Typical examples include police or fire cadets, St. Johns Ambulance youth programmes, and the army, sea and air cadets. The websites of many military and uniformed service VCOs set out that they are aiming to offer way for young people to access personal development and leadership opportunities and lead social action in their community, rather than recruiting service entrants. Military and uniformed service VCOs often receive some financial support via the parent service organisation, and they may also collect subscriptions and costs associated with specific activities. Participants are often responsible for their own transport to meetings and travel costs associated with training or camp events.</p>

Table 1 Categorisation of VCOs

The data from the mapping allows the spread of these different organisational types to be seen across the geographical areas (Table 2). Here, the first category has been split into its three sub-categories of arts, sports and environment.

Activity theme	Carlisle and area	Eden	West Cumbria	Barrow & Furness	North Lakes	South Lakes	Total
Arts and culture	9	1	16	20	7	20	73
Sports and physical activity	34	24	40	40	18	38	194
Environment including agriculture	8	3	5	5	5	5	31
General youth work/youth clubs	19	2	16	10	5	7	59
Scouting and guiding	4	2	8	1	2	9	26
Military and uniformed service	6	4	16	5	2	4	37
Total	80	36	101	81	39	83	420

Table 2 Distribution of VCOs across Cumbria

This can also be viewed in percentages to understand the weighting of different VCOs across the region (Table 3). While sports and physical activity are by far the most common and consistent across all areas, there is a more noticeable variation between arts and youth organisations; the former being more present in the South Lakes and Barrow, whereas youth groups are more populous in Carlisle. Military groups are most prevalent in West Cumbria.

Activity theme	Carlisle and area	Eden	West Cumbria	Barrow & Furness	North Lakes	South Lakes	% frequency of activity types offered by VCOs
Arts and culture	11%	3%	16%	25%	18%	24%	17%
Sports and physical activity	43%	67%	40%	49%	46%	46%	46%
Environment including agriculture	10%	8%	5%	6%	13%	6%	7%
General youth work/youth clubs	24%	6%	16%	12%	13%	8%	14%
Scouting and guiding	5%	6%	8%	1%	5%	11%	6%
Military and uniformed service	8%	11%	16%	6%	5%	5%	9%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Table 3 VCO distribution by percentage

4 Qualitative Findings

4.1 Thematic Overview

From an analysis of the qualitative data, key themes were identified around the role of voluntary and community organisations as assets for young people’s development. The data suggested that engaging with assets was filtered by a number of gates, which either independently or in conjunction with others determined the overall potential of the VCO as an asset for higher education outreach. This is represented in the following figure:

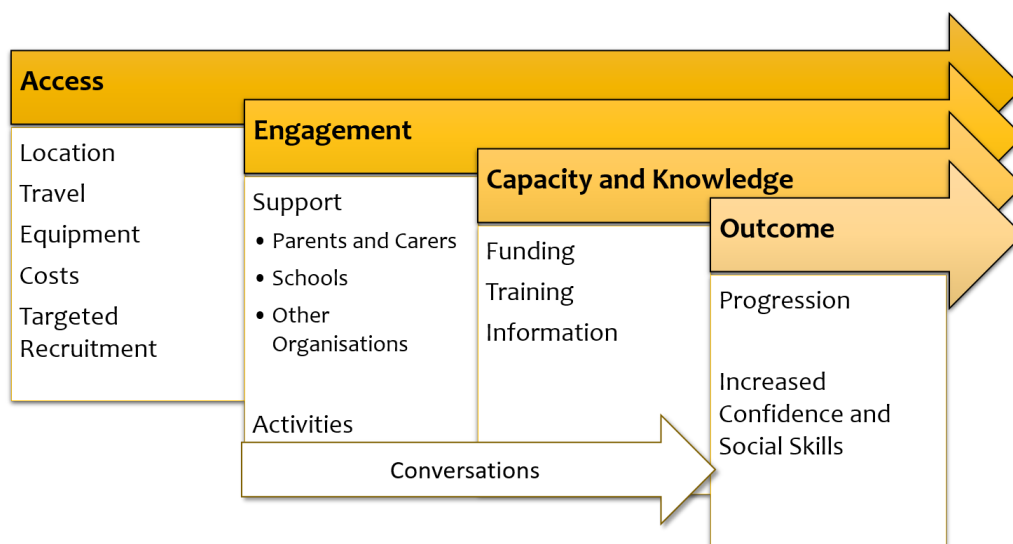


Figure 1 Asset model for VCOs

As the figure shows, the gating at work in potential assets introduces a linear development. In some cases this is straightforward: if a young person cannot access a particular activity because it is too far away, then they will usually not be able to engage with it. Further along, however, the number of gates becomes significant in defining the forms in which the capacity and knowledge of a VCO may have regarding HE: the information provided, for example, will depend upon the impact of the engagement gates, which in turn depends upon the access gates. This has a bearing on where outreach is best deployed in relation to the VCO.

In the following section, the individual themes will be unpacked to provide a qualitative representation of how the assets are formed and gated. It is important to remember here that the gating of assets is not necessarily an exclusive or intentional process, but simply material consequence of the kinds of activities they are. As such, some are straightforward; others are more nuanced depending on the activities in question. For all, it is important to note these variations in terms of the potential role they might play as part of HE outreach.

4.2 Access

The first gated aspect of an asset is the immediate accessibility of an activity. Access to activities depends upon a range of factors reflecting its type.

Table 4 below shows the variation across the VCOs participating in interviews.

VCO group	Costs	Travel	Equipment	Uniform
Activity clubs	Free	Participants responsible for own travel	No – avoid activities where equipment would be needed	No
	Free	Participants responsible for own travel	Provided	No
	£20 annual fee	Participants responsible for own travel (sometimes transport provided for specific projects)	Subsidised lease scheme £10 a year fee plus instrument lease e.g. £70 p.a.	No
	£3 session fee	Participants responsible for own travel	Provided but access to IT has been issue during lockdown	No
	£5 per session fee	Participants responsible for own travel	No budget for costumes or activity equipment; premises used have theatre equipment that group uses free of charge	Costumes
	£3 per session fee £3 plus £15 per month membership	Participants responsible for own travel to training and matches	Specialist equipment needed and provided	Team shirts (may be provided)
	£15 per term- Annual membership cost £20 (£80 annual cost)	Participants responsible for own travel to training and matches	Participants provide own boots and shin pads	Team shirts (may be provided)
Youth clubs and projects	Free	Provided	Provided	No
	Free	Participants responsible for own travel	Avoid activities where this needed or provided	No
	Free	Travel costs provided if needed	Provided if needed	No
	Free	Not known	Not known	No

	Free (pre-Covid £1)	Participants responsible for own travel	Provided if needed	No
	Free in some youth clubs; £2 per session in others to pay for sports coach	Participants travel on public transport but is paid for	Provided	No
	Session fees – 50p weekly Annual membership £5	Participants responsible for own travel	Provided	No
Scouting and guiding groups	Annual membership plus weekly/monthly/termly subs. Charge for additional activities (some grants available)	Participants responsible for own travel	Provided	Participants buy own uniform (grants available)
Military and uniformed service groups	Military groups: weekly/monthly subs e.g. £10 per month plus annual membership for some. Charge for additional activities e.g. camp and training (some grants available) Police cadets free.	Participants responsible for own travel	Provided	Uniform provided free but participants buy own boots

Table 4 Variations in access requirements

4.2.1 Location and Travel

A major consideration to access in Cumbria concerns travel (time, distance, cost, and availability) which differs within and between different areas. As detailed in previous research by HASKE for Hello Future (HASCE 2019), the features of travel and distance in rural Cumbria offer distinctive blockers for engaging in activities outside of school. For some young people there are no public transport options or ticket costs are prohibitive:

“I would say no one [young] relies on public transport if I'm honest...When we're doing a workshop that is bringing groups together then it's very much parents [providing transport].” (Participant 6)

In this sense, many young people are dependent upon the engagement of parents (see 4.3 below) for access. Interviewees suggested that in more built-up areas such as Carlisle, public transport can be more accessible for young people, but VCOs still took travel needs into account when planning:

“A lot of our partner delivery centres are either within easy walking reach or they are not far from a bus route. When we've delivered activities out into community spaces, we've considered the location. We've considered is it easy to get to within walking distance? If it isn't, is there a bus route nearby?” (Participant 10)

4.2.2 Equipment

The need for equipment acts as a filter for access to activities. This was recognised by most VCOs interviewed for this study, and many described various strategies used to overcome this barrier. This ranged from designing activities to avoid the need for equipment, using funding to book activities with providers that provide necessary equipment, providing all the equipment needed or providing subsidised access to equipment. This was particularly pertinent for music-based organisations where equipment might be prohibitively expensive at first: “They bring their own instruments and we have a load of stuff at the studio that we bring through and take to our various sessions so that they can use them...We don't want any barriers to be an issue.” (Participant 4)

Some specific VCOs face additional challenges around location and equipment. For example, a sports club that offers a range of different wheel chair sports and has accessed funding to provide specialist equipment to facilitate participation is restricted to offering activities at one location. Participants make their own way to the location, some travelling long distances and some share lifts to make it possible to participate. However, for young people who cannot rely on lifts from parents/family/carers/friends, travel to the location is likely to be form a closed gate.

4.2.3 Costs

In general, activity clubs and military groups tend to charge regular fees, whereas youth clubs and projects deliberately tend to be free or low cost, so that cost is not a barrier to participation. Nevertheless, some of the VCOs observe that any cost could be a significant barrier to some young person's engagement, particularly in more deprived areas:

“...if we do things out on our community grounds days, one of the requirements is wellies. Sometimes that puts a block on a schools group coming because they don't have wellies. Again, some kids' families don't have any money for wellies. You think, that's ridiculous because it's Cumbria, doesn't everybody have wellies? So now we've started buying small wellingtons.” (Participant 15)

4.2.4 Targeted Recruitment

Several VCOs noted that they did not collect data about the socio-economic or demographics of the young people who participated in their activities. However, when asked whether the young people that participated reflected the local context or included a broad social mix of participants, some noted that this could be dominated by a 'middle-class vibe'. Others reported a wide social mix, irrespective of local context. Age range of participants also varied, with some VCOs targeting a specific age range and others covering a wide age range, with mixed ages taking part in the activity/activities. One VCO commented if they were not flexible with age range, they would struggle to have viable numbers of young people coming.

For those activities which did target specific groups of young people for inclusion, this added an obvious gate on who can access activities provided by VCOs. Targeting will be linked to other factors, such as organisational mission, funding requirements, responses to local need, and so on. As such, a range of approaches is taken to targeted access.

“We tend to focus on the young people in the most marginalised situations. We target young people in the care system and those who have recently left care and are independent living. We target young people in schools who are at risk of being NEET or unlikely to get a good destination when they leave. We target young unemployed people; we target young people with poor mental health.” (Participant 13)

“Our LGBTQ+ group was very much that we had a cohort of five young people from the local secondary school about five years ago that all identified within the LGBTQ+ community. It was very much that there was no support in [the area]. We've got an adult LGB support group but there was nothing for young people.” (Participant 2)

Another VCO described how they targeted a certain geographical area in order to facilitate the transition of young people in rural primary schools moving to secondary. However, they reported that because of their location, one primary school dominated the provision.

“Because we were looking at their transition up to secondary was to bring them all together, so that it wasn't one or two from a village going into a big secondary school...but it became very [village name] centred.” (Participant 11)

The mission of VCOs can affect who chooses to engage with their activities, as this VCO explained in response to being asked about targeting:

“We are qualified in our expertise and knowledge with the BAME community, but the youth club is open to all young people. The benefit from that is that when we get white British young people that join, there's that time for learning and education around culture, diversity, equality and all the things that are super important for them to learn...I do find we either have white working class young people from deprived areas or BAME. If you look at issues that both of those communities have, they are actually very similar when it comes to inequality”
(Participant 9)

In some cases, targeting was explicitly connected to funding:

“You won't get funding from mainstream youth work unless you're doing something around the targeted services. Whether that is staying safe online, gangs and knife crime, teenage sex, safe sex...” (Participant 13)

4.3 Engagement

Once young people have accessed VCOs, the next series of gates relate to the means by which their engagement is prompted and continued.

4.3.1 Support

4.3.1.1 Parents and Carers

During interviews, the VCOs often mentioned parental support as a key factor affecting young people's engagement with activities they offered. Parental support here indicates a range of aspects, such as providing transport, giving young people money for the activities, reminding young people to attend. Some interviewees

commented that parental support started with parents actively searching out activities for their children, making enquiries and driving young people's participation forward:

“Quite often the people that get in touch, it's the parents that get in touch.” (Participant 14)

“I guess for the music centres that we run and support, the young people are turning up because the parents are supporting them”. (Participant 7)

Conversely, the reliance on parents to facilitate access to activities can add a further filter on sustainable engagement. This is all the more prescient when the age of the young people engaging requires a parent to be present.

“We've contacted a parent to find out if that person wants to engage and the parent's reason is usually something to do with something else that's going on. So I don't think the young person actually has that much control over it, if I'm honest.” (Participant 6)

“I could think of some more kids that could come but... will their parents support them?” (Participant 5)

4.3.1.2 Schools

While interviewees suggested word of mouth and social media were involved in recruiting young people to participate in their activities, a number of VCOs discussed the role of schools in supporting engagement. This had both positive and negative aspects. While schools provided VCOs with mediated access to young people, they were often dependent upon the school's capacity to organise that mediation. As one interview noted:

“Teachers [in secondary settings] at the moment are struggling just to do what they have to do, without looking at anything else.” (Participant 13)

Such mediation had, in the past, created an extra layer of gating in at least one case:

“I've done work in schools where teachers have said, 'I'm giving you the good ones' ...because they want it to be successful and there's going to be this fine product at the end that's a beautiful piece of artistry, but in their heads they want the 'good' kids to be doing it to produce something quality...” (Participant 15)

The interviewees reported that using schools as a vehicle to gain access to young people may help shape what activities are delivered by the VCO. This in turn, potentially, affects the engagement and uptake. Additionally, while this could be beneficial to tailoring the activities to a specific population need, some participants observed that activities delivered in schools could be shaped by a need to meet curriculum priorities, particularly in secondary schools:

“My experience of going into secondary schools is you're having to really look at the curriculum, you are having to jump through the hoops of the school. So, what you teach can be really engaging and fun, but...the young people can't probably quite disassociate that from being a school activity. Especially if it's in class time.”
(Participant 6)

Other interviewees reported taking a targeted approach to support the school. For example, one VCO works with young people identified as lacking soft skills which are a barrier to their engagement in school and making

friendships. The activities they deliver to enhance these skills (communication skills, self-efficacy, confidence and emotional resilience) often also result in young people being able to develop friendships with their peers:

“...we've found on loads of occasions, because these kids have been identified because they might be lacking certain elements of these core skills, but these friendships have formed really quickly. That benefits them to the rest of the school year because they've got somebody that they can relate to”. (Participant 8)

Other VCOs aimed for similar results by emphasising the difference between their style of activities and those encountered in a school context:

“We're the option for kids that don't like what they do in school.” (Participant 4)

“I'm actually after those kids that are maybe more challenged by the academic world. They often come up with the more interesting ideas and their drawing is maybe livelier. So, I am looking for something very different.”

(Participant 15)

4.3.1.3 Other Organisations

For some VCOs, young people find about their activities via referral by other statutory organisations or other VCOs. One VCO providing disability-accessible sports activities noted that they also get referrals to their organisation from hospital/health services. Interviewees noted that where referrals are a key engagement mechanism, the quality and reach of organisational networks is key:

“What we've learned is that the reputation and skill of our partners and their connectedness across our communities, enables them to share work via word of mouth at meetings, in training and so on, about the [VCO name] projects... primarily it is word of mouth, so that peer to peer colleague network.” (Participant 10)

Just as some interviewees found that schools worked with them to plug gaps in the curriculum, so too some youth work-oriented groups suggested that VCOs were used to fill work that would be done by statutory organisations before funding in that area had been cut.

“There's a real move just now toward more integrated and partnership working. For those of us who are very cynical, that would be to do with how do the statutory organisations get services for free?” (Participant 13)

4.3.2 Activities

Activities in all types of VCOs were reported to offer opportunities and experiences that supported young people's consideration about their future, whether implicitly or explicitly. The success of these activities was key to young people utilising the full extent of the assets the VCO's work offered.

VCOs ranged from having a specific remit to support young people's future thinking to those whose objective was just to support young people to participate in an activity. The former planned activities, such as drop-in sessions, CV workshops, work placements, training courses, targeted work on widening ambitions and trips to employers, colleges and universities. Asked how they viewed their role, this staff member was clear it was a key part of their role:

“We want young people to think about their future. ... I can tell myself from having conversations with young people, a lot are more interested in what other jobs are out there. When I've spoken to them, some young people

know definitely not, they don't want to go to university, they only want to do this at college and that's it. Whereas others are starting to see okay, if I do go to university, that's how I can reach this job and this profession.”

(Participant 1)

Additionally, VCOs whose main focus is to enable young people to join in doing a “fun” activity, observed that their knowledge of the young person and time spent with them meant that participation in the activities facilitated incidental progression opportunities and experience:

“I don't run youth theatre thinking this is going to help them if they want to go off and be an actor, for example, because most people aren't going to go off and do that. The reasons I do it are because I love it, that's the first thing, but I think it teaches an awful lot of skills and it's a lot of fun. I wouldn't say I would do it with a view to it being a springboard for them. Although having said that, it's impossible for it not to come up.” (Participant 14)

A number of VCOs provide opportunities through Young Leader schemes, where young people start to learn leadership skills and to help deliver sessions. In several VCOs this led on to those young people becoming employed by the VCO and/or progressing to further study, for example, studying music at university. Sports clubs often sponsor young people for coaching training courses and one football coach described how this might be presented as an alternative career to becoming a professional footballer, and also described how one former member had progressed to studying sports coaching at university.

A VCO that provides music activities started organising online webinars as a way of keeping their young people engaged during Covid-19 lockdown, which has evolved into the young people themselves now organising the webinars, deciding on topics, contacting music industry professionals of all types to participate and then recording the webinars. This means that the young people are beginning to learn networking skills and create their own network with the backing and safeguarding of the VCO but in a way that would not have happened previously, especially as Cumbria is remote from music industry centres in London and Manchester.

4.3.3 Conversations

Several interviewees mentioned that in addition to the progression supporting activities they delivered, informal conversations and casual opportunities for socialising were important aspects in young people's development.

“I think sometimes in a youth club we can get caught up in just doing arts and crafts and playing football, but why are we doing those arts and crafts? What else can come from that? Because that's when you have some of your best conversations.” (Participant 9)

Interviewees report that engaging with adults outside school can be important for young people, particularly those lacking confidence. The involvement, for example, of an artist or musician, can expose the young people to a different potential pathway:

“You're not a teacher, people are interested so young people will ask you about the work that you're doing, the projects you are doing and all of a sudden – I remember as a kid thinking, I could be an artist, I could make things. ... You don't often have that luxury of asking teachers those questions because there's a level of respect

that is expected in a school situation. It's a different and more personable relationship with an artist or a practitioner doing work the way we do." (Participant 15)

Interviewees suggested that such conversations were built upon the trusted relationships between organisation staff and volunteers, and the young people engaged. It is these relationships which several interviewees identified as key for developing confidence and skills.

"[Young people] often know the direction they want to go, it's just sometimes having that confidence to get to their next step. Or they think 20 steps ahead and you can be there to say let's just do step one first, instead of thinking about what's going to happen when you get to step 19 and 20. So it's stabilising them. It's giving them that solid platform." (Participant 11)

In VCOs which are neither run by youth workers nor underpinned by a youth work agenda, the interviewees explained that the nature of the activities and the ongoing contact can facilitate trust:

"A lot of the stuff that we do in drama, even if you're not specifically looking at mental health, I think by the very nature of the activity you are building up a relationship and you are building up a place where you do trust each other...So that it is a space where they can come and feel comfortable to express themselves." (Participant 14)

"Because we spend so much time with them, they tell you about what they are interested in, they tell you about what they're doing at the weekend....You have to be aware that not all children have a supportive network of people around them that encourage them and go, 'You're good at that, you should do it!' So we are always cheerleaders for them, all the time." (Participant 4)

4.4 Capacity and Knowledge

Once young people have accessed and become engaged with a VCO, the next series of gates involves the capacity and knowledge of an organisation to engage with them about their potential decision-making regarding their future. Much of the capacity issues is rooted in a VCO's funding remit. Interviews suggested a wide variation in the sources of information that VCOs drew on to discuss young people's future with, although in this sample existing personal knowledge outweighed grey literature from HE.

4.4.1 Funding

Given that funding for all organisations, statutory or VCOs, has become either increasingly scarce and/or more competitively sought after, the interviewees were asked about their capacity to include or support conversations with young people on their future amongst their other roles and responsibilities. Interviewees suggested that most staff and volunteers in VCOs make time to support participants in thinking about their future development, whether or not they have funded capacity to do so. However, where funding specifically exists to support this kind of activity, there is more scope for activities and support to be planned into the structure and delivery of activities.

VCOs will typically have a number of funding profiles: fully or part funded by other organisations, self-funded or partly self-funded, levying membership fees, charging session costs and fundraising from the public. Organisational funding may determine how, where and what activities are delivered or the targeting participants (the latter linked to organisation's objectives). For example, a senior leader in a delivery organisation which also provides infrastructure support to organisations working with young people, children and families, noted that in over their 18 years in post much funding has moved from mostly 'unrestricted' to no funding of this type currently. The funding effect for VCOs is that they must make choices about the activities they deliver and who they deliver them to:

“Do you get driven by the funding, do you get driven by the mission statement? It's really difficult... 18 years ago, the vast majority of our funding was what I would call unrestricted funding. Do what you like with it. We have no unrestricted funding now.” (Participant 13)

Some interviewees noted that national level funders could make decisions which miss the nuance of the geography and relative affluence across a large area, such as Cumbria, and potentially disadvantage some localities. For example:

“The vast majority of our activity is in West Cumbria. That's not intentional, it's just the way that funding falls. For example, if you live in a very deprived community, you are more likely to be able to access funding. Funders don't perceive, for example, that Eden and South Lakes has deprivation and yet there are real pockets there.”
(Participant 13)

At the same time, the perception of need in a specific area may lead to the focus of activities being prescribed by funding requirements. For example:

“Living where we are, you can possibly get funding now and again to do something on Wordsworth, but there's not always the funding to do the stuff that you might want to do. My younger group did a piece about refugees before last Christmas, which was great...But there was no funding for it. That's the only constraint, you're obviously not going to get funding for just anything you fancy doing.” (Participant 14)

Conversely, funding can sometimes mean that activities can be offered that would not normally be available to young people in the area and/or to young people that have not yet developed an interest in a more frequently provided type of activity, such as sport or music:

“the kids that do this programme, the ones that are maybe not particularly sporty or musical, haven't quite found their own niche yet, this programme allows them to come together to focus on activities that are not available in any other clubs or delivery model in the area.” (Participant 8)

General cuts to local authority budgets over the past ten years had created further gates to accessibility:

“We did used to get funded from the local authority. That funding ended in 2015... All our activities, projects, everything we do in terms of youth work delivery we have to find funding for ...when we lost our funding, we were in a three-story town centre building...people used to get off the bus and come in...We had to move out of the town centre...which isn't on people's route anywhere.” (Participant 2)

But interviewees also noted that funding from organisations such as the National Lottery, which require regular reporting and evaluation, can also mean that minimum quality standards in the delivery of activities are achieved. Interviewees reported that increasingly, funders will not fund VCOs unless they can demonstrate training and minimum standards in training and safeguarding aspects for those working with young people. Overall, it is important to understand how funding for VCOs is embedded within a number of tensions. Table 5 (below) summarises the main tensions interviewees identified in funded activities.

VCO identity and funding requirements	Constant tension between VCO mission and funder and funding objectives
	Competition between VCOs for funding may affect their ability to co-ordinate and co-operate
Requirements of funding introduces extra gating	Locations where activities are delivered may be determined by funding and this may concentrate effort in certain areas
	Type of activities delivered can be determined by funding which may constrain or 'open up' the range of what is delivered in a specific area
	Targeting of participants by funder requirements may mean some young people are not eligible to participate and there may be gatekeeper effects associated with who is deciding which young people fall into target groups and why
Funding aims at odds with potentially effective means of outreach	Funders are often looking for desired activities to be ticked off, so may ask for a programme of workshops whereas youth workers and staff on the ground may feel casual conversations arising from contextual incidents and comments are a more effective way for these areas to be addressed
	Funders may be focused on addressing specific areas of concern over and above casual socialising

Table 5 Themes arising from funding complexities

4.4.2 Training

Some VCOs identified that being trained appropriately in specific skills, for example, youth work, was an important aspect affecting whether young people engaged with the activities. While one VCO reported that they are not all trained youth workers, they apply a youth work methodology and believes this aids engagement. Other interviewees had no training in engaging young people specifically, but drew upon their professional background in order to successfully carry out their activities. For example, for arts-based VCOs, staff and/or volunteers might be practising artists or musicians or otherwise actively involved themselves in the activity.

“Everyone that works at [VCO name] is a musician, apart from our finance officer, who is wonderful but not a musician. All of our freelancers and all of our leads that come in to do stuff are all working musicians, including myself and the director. We are in bands and we record stuff”. (Participant 4)

This was reported as not only enhancing the value of the relationship and activity for young people but also demonstrated to young people that following a similar path was a real possibility for them. At the same time, as can be seen below (4.4.3), there was a converse relationship to the information sources utilised by staff.

4.4.3 Information

For example, one VCO works primarily with young people 18-25 years old (but also works with 17 year olds) to provide a comprehensive assessment to barriers to employment and/or further training and education. Staff work with the participant to develop a participant defined needs-led plan and identifies steps and support to help them achieve their goals. They work with partner organisations with niche expertise, for example, substance misuse, domestic violence and provide experiences and opportunities to support health, well-being and self-care, social confidence as well as paid training or support into FE/HE.

However, outside of those VCOs with operational links to FE and HE, the sources of information for conversations with young people were more likely to be based on individuals’ knowledge. Interviewees were asked where staff and volunteers in VCOs primarily got their information from when they are advising or talking to young people about “futures,” and Table 6 below summarises the responses.

VCO type	Mostly or only general or background knowledge and experience	Signposting to other and/or specialist organisations or information sources	Actively develop and maintain networks and information sources
Activity club	5	1	1
Youth club or project	3	1	2

Table 6 Where VCOs retrieve information on FE/HE

4.5 Outcomes

The final series of gates concerns the types of outcomes VCO activity aim for. While this is, to some extent, visible across the entire set of qualitative findings, it is an important aspect to consider when ascertaining the likelihood of successful outreach work.

4.5.1 Progression

Youth group VCOs provided opportunities and experiences which they felt focused on a young person’s progression. For example, one youth club provides activities that bolster English acquisition in non-English

speaking young people. Broader support involves supporting these people, given that they may already have a strong sense of their future career.

“There’s very much an expectation that those young people will be academically successful. Where we come alongside is to really recognise that can bring a level of pressure to young people. So, we would very much support them in their health and wellbeing around that cultural pressure to become very successful.” (Participant 10)

“We talk to them about what they want to be when they grow up, what sort of skills they might need...When they hit the senior group, we encourage those that are ready to become a peer leader. We support them to help us run the youth club. That allows them to build some additional skills. Then we'll write them a reference when they go off to university or getting a job. So, we provide opportunities for young people to progress certain skill areas if they want to.” (Participant 10)

Other VCOs provide activities that help young people at risk of becoming disengaged with school to either ‘get back on track’ with school education or to think about different or alternative progression ideas. One music VCO had numerous examples of how finding something outside academic studies at school that they enjoyed; for example, a young person, struggling at school and later assessed as dyslexic, started trumpet playing lessons and ultimately decided to study music in further education.

Yet it was important for some interviewees to point out that they were not simply school-by-other-means. Indeed, a common aspect identified by some VCOs was the importance of being ‘not school’ because then young people were engaged because they wanted to be, rather than because they had to.

“Even though we work with schools extremely well, we are not there for kids to come to us and then to go back to school and their grades then be fantastic...it’s working with the child and being person-centred, making them feel better in themselves.” (Participant 11)

4.5.2 Increased Confidence and Social Skills

Several VCOs mentioned the importance of supporting social skill development sessions and activities to inspire young people.

“Number one is confidence. Doing outside activities, arts activities, environment activities away from school, those things give you confidence and give you a different sense of yourself.... I actually delight in the kids that are -- those kids like me...Nobody at school would ever have thought that I was going to go on and go to art college, run an arts company and be an artist.” (Participant 15)

As a result, for some VCOs, the environment created within the activity was the key to ensuring success. As before, the contrast with perceived school environments was raised by some interviewees as significant:

“We’re not there to fix or change them, ultimately, it’s down to them who they want to be, where they want to go and what they want to do. So, we’re not there to tell them right, this is the route you are going to go on. It’s more like, where do you want to go? And see how we can buffer you along to get you where you want to be. It’s the environment that’s created. They’re relaxed, they’re safe.” (Participant 11)

“For me, it’s all about relationships, it’s all about how you speak to people. It’s all about making them not feel any less valued than you are.” (Participant 2)

4.6 Impact of Covid-19

All interviewees outlined that Covid-19 has changed some aspects of how activities function as assets for young people, both positively and negatively. For example, for some, it has forced a rapid, creative response to think how to continue delivering activities and maintaining engagement with young people. This has included moving to online delivery, taking activities to where young people are instead of young people going to where the activities are, for example, dropping all-inclusive activity packs to young people’s homes, meeting outdoors. Some interviewees have found that engaging directly with young people (rather than through schools or parents and carers) or engaging directly with parents and carers (rather than through schools) has started to transform their engagement relationships and effectiveness. Others suggested that there is potential in offering, for example, online delivery and intend to retain and build this as part of their ‘normal’ offer.

However, the forced changes how adversely affected how activities function as assets:

“Covid has been incredibly difficult, just that simple example of we were working with young people outdoors in an outdoor space. All of a sudden, that had to stop, and we had to do something online...It just instantly becomes more difficult...One of the benefits of doing arts workshops or doing events with young people is that you're taking them away from the home environment or a school environment...With the Covid thing, doing stuff online it's been straightaway that they are in the house, on the kitchen table with their family.” (Participant 15)

For others, they report that not being able to physically see young people on a regular basis means a loss of insight to their wellbeing:

“Actually, it was a way of checking up on them. That sounds really sneaky, but if I can knock a door and a young person comes to the door and I can physically see them, and see that they are okay, I can go away a happy youth worker. And if I see something I don't like then I can raise that concern.” (Participant 9)

Changes in the way activities are being delivered in response to Covid-19 lockdown and management, have started to change the role of parental support in terms of young people’s engagement. Some VCOs are reporting that engagement depends less on parents and that this is a shift for some young people to navigate. This shift to online delivery had enabled one VCO to double the frequency with which one of their groups, due to the lack of travelling for parents and young people. This also opened sessions up to young people from a wider geography:

“We do have young people from West Cumbria, North Cumbria and they are all coming together online... Every two weeks they are coming together and jamming. Yes, it's not face to face so there is a loss in that sense, but they are a lot more engaged, I think, in what we're doing. A lot of those people are [also] now engaging in the webinar and I think that wouldn't be the case if this were happening face to face because they wouldn't be able to give that much time over”. (Participant 6)

Another interviewee noted that the move to on-line access had increased their participation levels, and helped support new ways of working with schools as gatekeepers:

“In order for us to access the parents and the children, we needed the school’s cooperation to send out a letter on our behalf which contained a link to say, ‘if you want to register for online lessons, you need to follow this link.’ We quickly managed to establish 400 online lessons a week. That is 400 sets of parents that we really didn't have direct access to previously. It’s made a huge difference, in terms of the way that we can interact with those parents and also ask them questions about the provision and what we've done over this period of lockdown.”

(Participant 7)

5 Conclusion

5.1 VCOs as Assets for Outreach

This research has shown that there are a wide variety of VCOs engaging with young people in Cumbria, many of which are either already supporting them in some shape or form with thinking about their futures, or have the potential to. At the same time, the interviewees reported that information from HE about potential futures was under-utilised. There is clear potential for further links to be made between outreach practitioners and VCOs. The potential assets of VCOs for young people’s decision-making was often predicated on the fact that their activities were “not school”, and typically took a different approach to engaging young people than more formal settings. In some cases this was informed by youth work training or approaches, but in others was borne from the nature of the activities offered. This may require outreach practitioners to consider the extent to which their own activities and information materials are geared towards a school context, and whether adjustments would be necessary when approaching VCOs.

Many of the interviewees identified that conversations about young people’s futures were highly informal, and this may help to shape the ways in which outreach engages with VCOs: that is, whether attending and presenting at activities is as helpful as providing staff and volunteers with appropriate information or guidance on how these conversations might be handled.

It is notable that the majority of interviewees did not collect data on demographics of their participants, and as such outreach activities will need to think carefully about how the various gates identified affect the access, engagement and outcomes of the young people involved, and subsequently help shape outreach targeting. Likewise, outreach activities will benefit from a cohesive evaluation framework for assessing the effectiveness of their work with VCOs, given the differences highlighted between these and more traditional routes for HE outreach and widening participation to engage with young people.

5.2 The Role of Gates

A final discussion on the notion of assets as “gated” is useful. In some senses, the notion of the gate can be seen in straightforward terms as an access point which can be opened for some but not others, due to a variety of factors including material circumstances (location of the asset, for example) and strategic or policy circumstances (targeted recruitment or funding requirements, for example). This is demonstrated in the thematic overview presented at the start of Section 4:

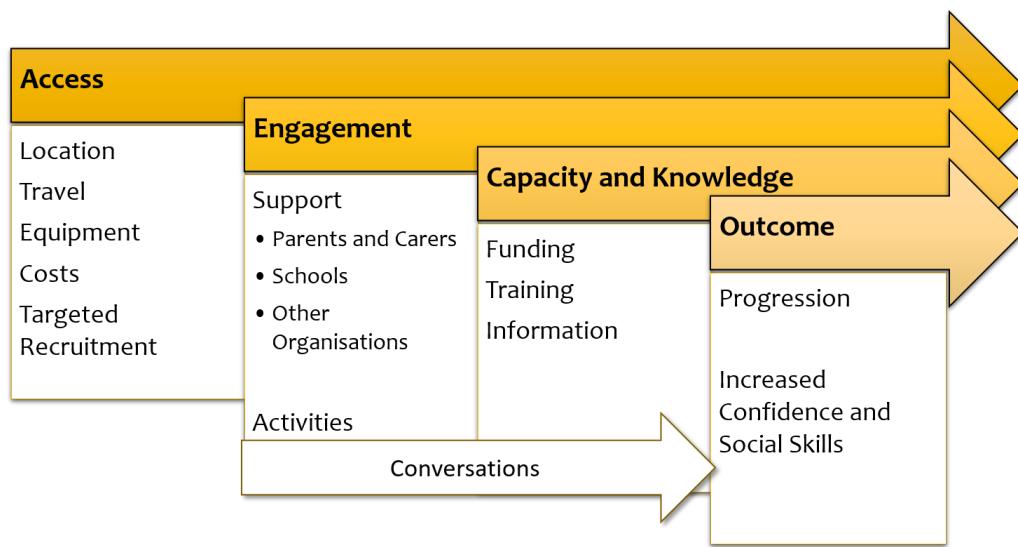


Figure 2 Asset model revisited

Presenting the gates in this way allows a general picture of ways in which the full benefit of VCOs is reached, and the stages at which outreach work might be best suited to be involved.

The two risks of this model, however, are 1) it remains too general to capture the ways in which assets are filtered, and the variations in how tangible particular gates might be; and 2) that gates are seen only as disablers, rather than necessary and fluid aspects of an asset being effective.

It can be more helpful to understand the notion of gating assets by borrowing models from audio gating, as represented below in Figure 3.

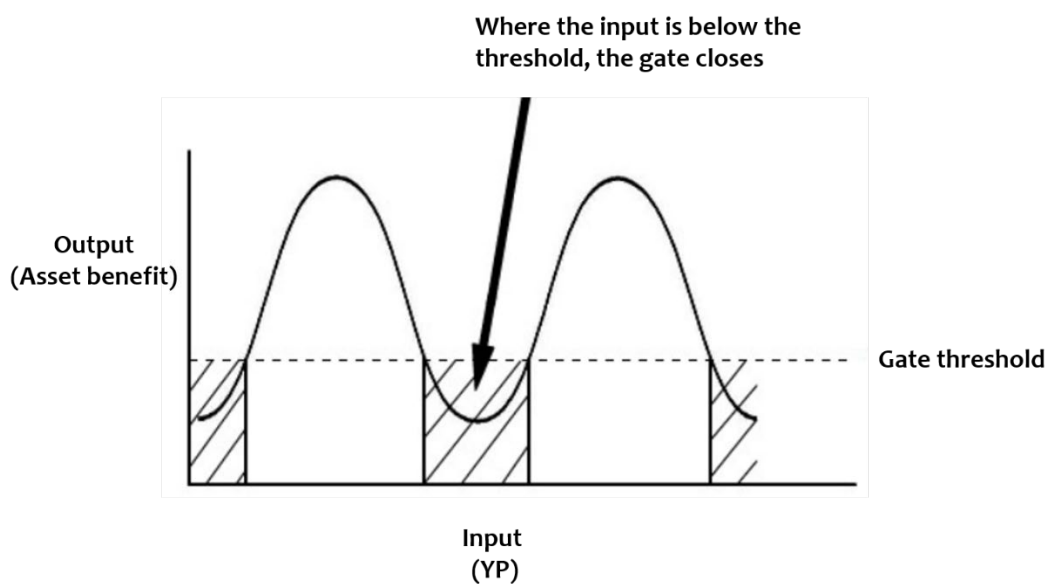


Figure 3 Alternative gating model

Rather than position gates as obstacles, this model positions assets in terms of “inputs” and “outputs.” In this case, the “inputs” identified are the agency of the young people themselves, while the “outputs” are the overall benefits of the VCO as an asset to their decision-making. Each “gate” – whether this be around access, engagement, or capacity – presents a threshold which will filter the extent of the output (benefit).

There are several advantages to this model. First, it allows understanding of Young People’s access and engagement with VCOs as dynamic and contextual; in other words, it allows us to represent how multiple

thresholds may enable a young person to utilise the benefits in some situations but not in others. This is particularly key for understanding the transferability of these benefits into future HE contexts. Second, it allows us to represent how assets operate on a scale of benefit (that is: gates are not either/or; one can engage with a VCO with only minimal benefit, or conversely huge benefit). Likewise, it allows space for the agency of the young person in utilising a VCO by recognising their input is a fundamental key to success. Third, it allows for more nuanced thresholds to be considered which do not fit into the linear model presented in Figure 1 and 2. This can be supplemented with a further diagram which illustrates how such thresholds are created (see Figure 4 below). In particular, this model shows how some aspects of gating are far less tangible than others, though, based on the research here, potentially of equal importance for the benefits of the asset to be realised.

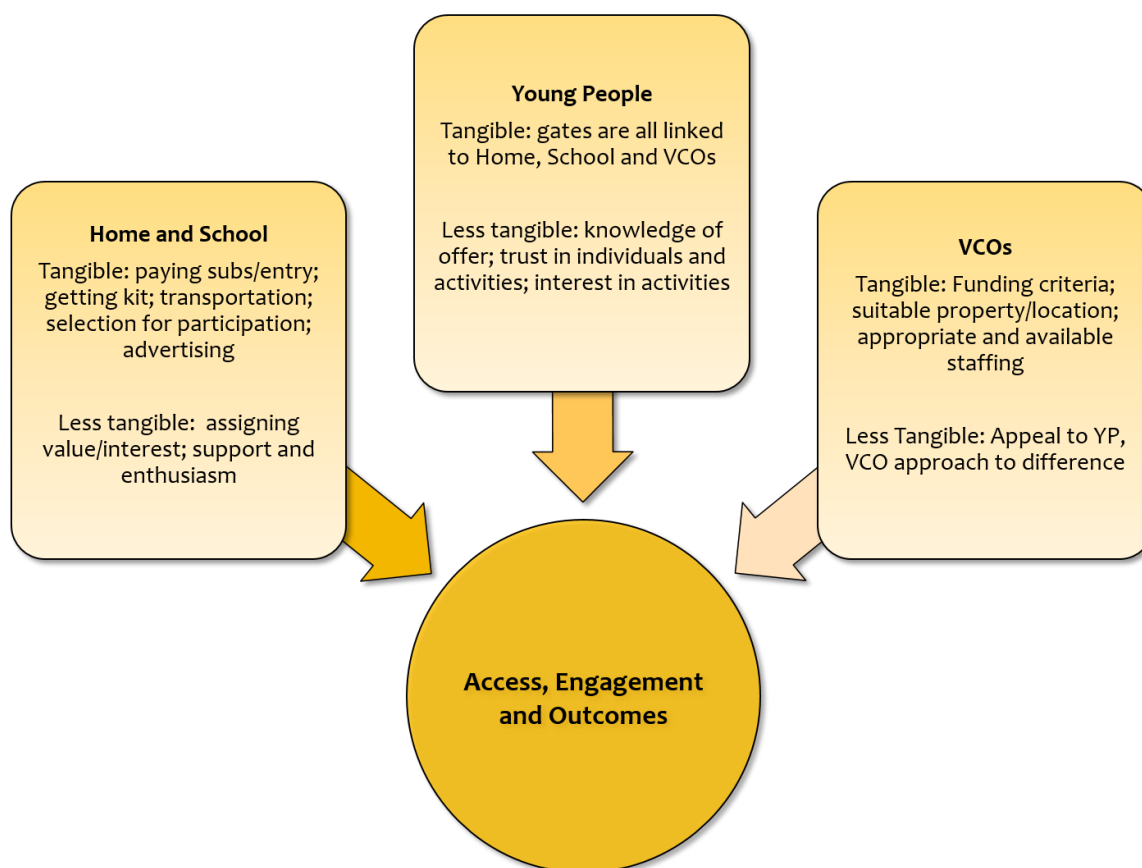


Figure 4 Tangible and less tangible gating

The importance of understanding the role of gating in assets is paramount for effective outreach work. This report has shown that VCOs can be effective assets for supporting young people in their decision-making regarding their future careers and education. However, it is important for outreach work to understand where and when the best forms of information and intervention might be to utilise these assets to the greatest extent.

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