

A report commissioned by:

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HASKE

HEALTH & SOCIETY KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE

VOLUNTARY AND COMMUNITY ORGANISATIONS IN CUMBRIA:

Assets for Young People's Decision - Making



Introduction & Objectives

Overall, this research 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.

A key focus of the 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)*.

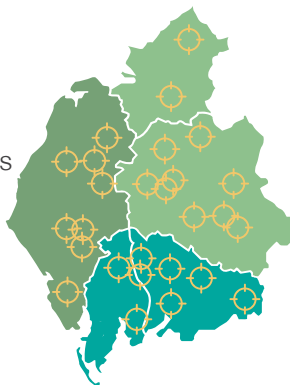
This report informs the model of asset-based approaches to widening participation by detailing how these “gates” work in practice: **how they are formed within each organisation, and how understanding this gating will support more bespoke and effective outreach interventions.**

Methodology:

Data was collected in **two ways**:

A Scoping review

The **first** was a scoping review (**table 1**) which mapped the Voluntary Community Organisations (VCOs) in Cumbria that could be considered as assets, or potential assets, to young people’s thinking and decision-making about their future options.



Interviews



The **second** data collection exercise involved semi-structured interviews with a sample of VCOs identified through the mapping exercise detailed below (**table 1**). **The interviews sought to identify:**

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

Mapping Voluntary Community Organisations in Cumbria

Across Cumbria, nearly 450 types of activities delivered by VCOs were identified. The data from the mapping allows the spread of these different organisational types to be seen across the geographical areas.

Table 1:

Activity Theme	Carlisle and area	Eden	West Cumbria	Barrow & Furness	North Lakes	South Lakes	Total
Arts and culture	9 11%	1 3%	16 16%	20 25%	7 18%	20 24%	73 17%
Sports and physical activity	34 43%	24 67%	40 40%	40 49%	18 46%	38 46%	194 46%
Environment including agriculture	8 10%	3 8%	5 5%	5 6%	5 13%	5 6%	31 7%
General youth work /youth clubs	19 24%	2 6%	16 16%	10 12%	5 13%	7 8%	59 14%
Scouting and guiding	4 5%	2 6%	8 8%	1 1%	2 5%	9 11%	26 6%
Military and uniformed service	6 8%	4 11%	16 16%	5 6%	2 5%	4 5%	37 9%
Total	80	36	101	81	39	83	420

> Categorising VCOs

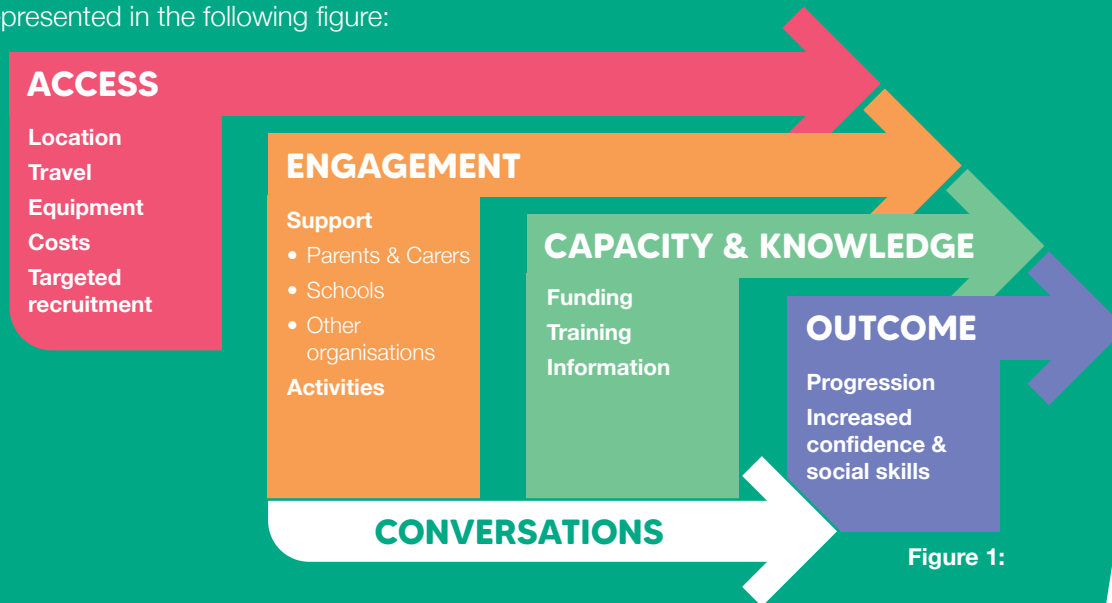
Analysis of the mapping suggests that VCOs delivering activities to young people can be categorised into **four main groups**. (Table 2 below)

Table 2:

<p>1 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>2 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>3 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>4 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>

Qualitative Findings

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:



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.

Location and travel

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's bringing groups together then it's very much parents providing transport. ”

(Participant 6)

Equipment



The need for equipment acts as a filter for access to activities. 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)



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 outside 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)

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. 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.

ENGAGEMENT

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



Parents and carers

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)

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:

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

(Participant 5)

Other organisations

For some VCOs, young people find out about their activities via referral by other statutory organisations or other VCOs. 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)



Conversations

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)

Schools



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)

Activities



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 included 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.

A number of VCOs provide opportunities through Young Leader schemes, where young people start to learn leadership skills and to help deliver sessions. 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.

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.

CAPACITY & KNOWLEDGE



Funding

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. 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)



Information

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.

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 here 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)



Conversations

'Conversations', as detailed on pg5, is also relevant for 'Capacity & Knowledge'

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.

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.”

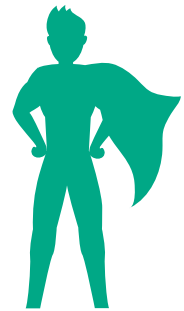
(Participant 10)

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.

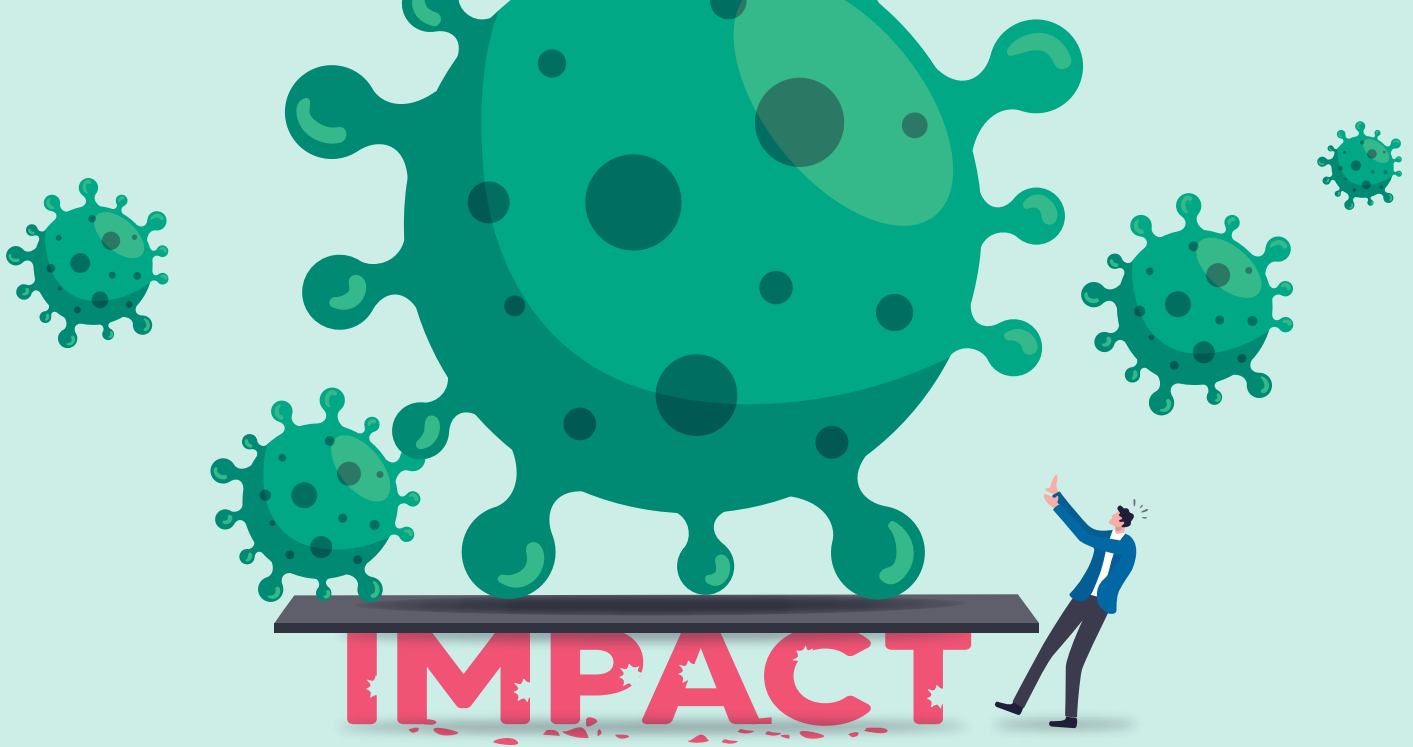
Increased confidence and social skills



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)



> Impact of Covid

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.

“ 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)

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.

> 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.

> The role of Gates

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).

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.

Summary of Key Findings

This research 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.

Categorising VCOs

1
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).

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Organisations where the main purpose is youth work and the activities are an engagement or development tool.

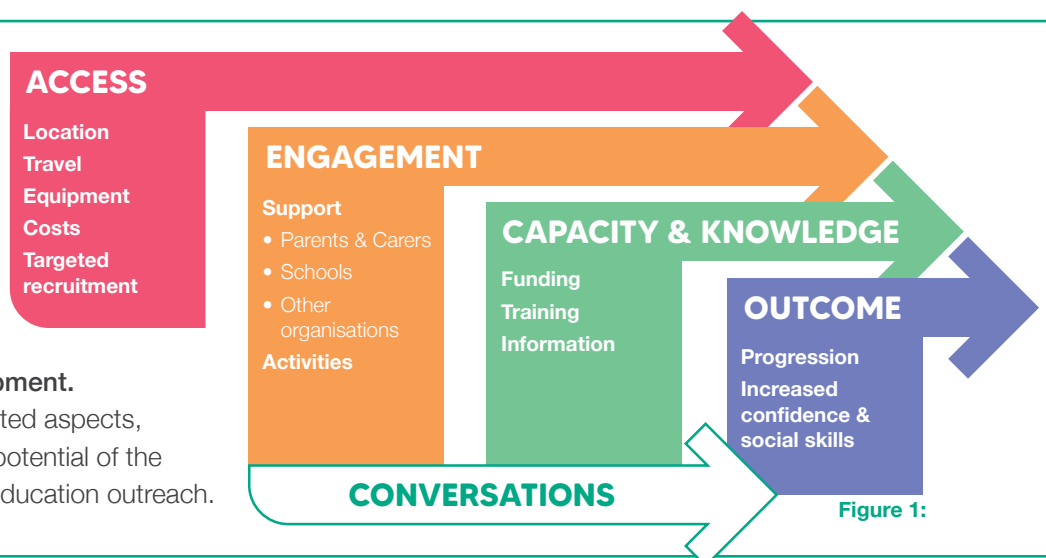
3
Scouting and guiding groups which typically focus on both young people and community aspects.

4
Military and uniformed service organisations with youth sections.

Gated Aspects

Key themes identified around the role of voluntary and community organisations as assets for young people’s development.

This table categorises the gated aspects, which determine the overall potential of the VCO as an asset for higher education outreach.



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VCOs as Assets for Outreach

This research has shown that there are a wide variety of VCOs engaging with young people in Cumbria, many are either already supporting them in some shape or form with thinking about their futures.

Information from HE about potential futures was under-utilised and there is clear potential for further links to be made between outreach practitioners and VCOs.

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