

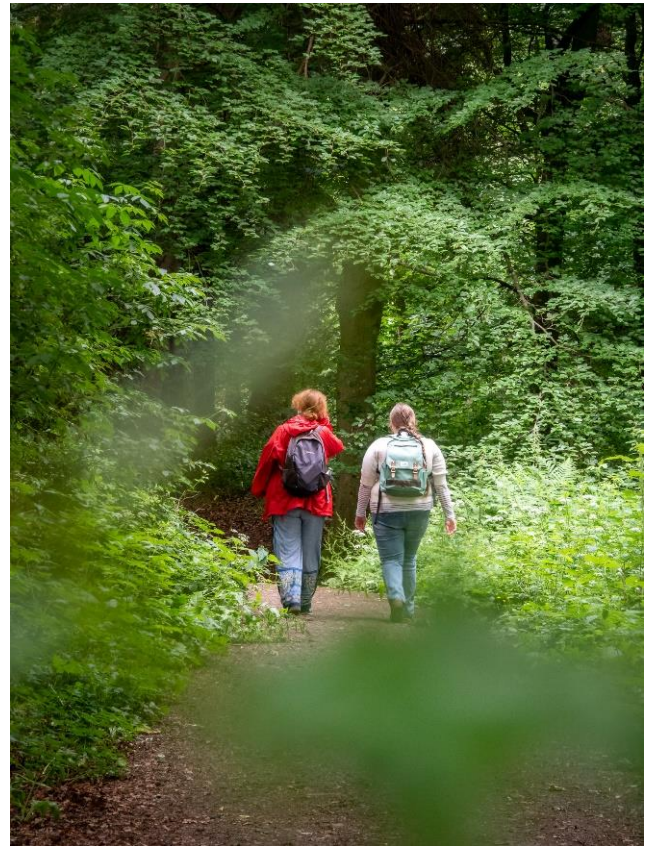
Awards Plus 1:1 Mentoring: what's next?



It's a time of reflection and of looking ahead for Awards Plus. 2023 saw a re-launch, with a new name and branding, whilst retaining well-established principles. We're starting 2024 with a refreshed outlook on how to best provide meaningful, flexible and accessible pathways to personal achievement for young people who benefit from extra support and might otherwise miss out.

Three years of funding for Awards Plus 1:1 Mentoring work from the National Lottery Community Fund and Scottish Children's Lottery concluded in November 2023. This generous backing meant that hundreds of young people experiencing difficult mental health received direct support towards youth awards participation. Our longstanding partnership with CAMHS (Children and Adolescent Mental Health Service) was strengthened in the process, too.

*"I'm more capable of doing things,
I believe in myself more."*



Background

A model of personalised 1:1 support was piloted in 2006 when a gap in Duke of Edinburgh's Award provision for young people with mental health issues was identified. Working closely with CAMHS to identify referrals who would benefit from this bespoke help was recognised at the time as a unique offer, the first partnership of its kind in the UK.

Since then, dedicated Awards Plus staff (aka Friends of the Award to 2023) have delivered and developed an approach to youth awards mentoring which fosters an understanding of the challenges many young people experience. Co-design and mental health-informed youth work approaches are integrated to find out what makes a difference for young people who often feel left behind or overlooked.

Today, Duke of Edinburgh's Award participation remains a core part of our 1:1 Mentoring offer, along with a growing portfolio of nature, community and heritage-based youth awards including the John Muir Award, Heritage Hero Award, Ramblers Scotland Out There Award, Saltire Award and more. By exploring what meaningful achievement looks like for each young person, no two awards journeys are the same. Individual aspirations, passions, curiosities, and experiences are absolutely central to each.

*"It's taken me out of my comfort zone.
I've managed to leave my house to complete tasks and spoken to people."*

Benefits

There are multiple benefits in connecting young people who face mental health struggles with youth awards, with nature, and with their wider community.

- It's well-established that connecting with nature supports physical and mental health and wellbeing, and can play a part in mental illness recovery (often alongside counselling, therapy and medication). A '[Wild and Well](#)' hub hosted by the John Muir Trust collates many articles, research, books and films exploring the link between wild places and wellbeing.
- Volunteering, giving back and taking action for nature helps individuals feel good about differences they can make. It can benefit biodiversity and communities too.
- Youth awards offer structure. Support from a 1:1 Mentor helps to target suitable opportunities in an informed way to bring focus and frameworks to young people for whom this might be absent.
- Recognising achievement at every step of participation - from making an appointment and getting on a bus to completing an adventurous expedition or getting involved in a conservation project or climate campaign - can have great value in addressing confidence, esteem and anxiety issues.

So, what does Awards Plus 1:1 Mentoring look like? On completing a referral process, a young person (age 14-25) can meet regularly with a mentor in community settings and green spaces to identify meaningful goals and support needs. A trusting, collaborative relationship aims to understand how personal experiences affect engagement, how best to work together and which awards and activities to focus on. A self-paced, flexible and progressive approach reduces pressure and increases 'ownership'. There is no fixed period of involvement; some engagement is over a number of years. This flexibility - being supported to "try it and see" and having the time to build trust with a mentor - makes all the difference, we're told.

We aim to offer routes to learn new skills, discover what they're good at, maintain routine, create positive relationships with adults and peers, make connections with nature, gain new experiences and broaden personal horizons. Reflection and celebration are embedded wherever it's appropriate.

[A Case Study interview with E](#) shows how a participant with Awards Plus since 2019 has gone from strength to strength through supported youth awards achievement, setting and meeting challenges including expeditions, an Isle of Eigg residential and reading 50 books...

"I needed support gaining confidence and new skills to be able to put myself out there... I've learned I can do things I never thought I would. It's quite weird to reflect on that and remember all the things I've done which I didn't think was possible for me."

Need

The Children's Society's annual survey shows that wellbeing in children and young people has been falling for over a decade, with mental health services [stretched beyond capacity](#).

- According to [SAMH](#) every day in Scotland, 20 young people don't get the help they need for mental health problems. On average, children and young people with mental health difficulties go 10 years between first becoming unwell and getting any help. Three in four (76%) parents said that their child's mental health had deteriorated while waiting for specialist mental health support.
- Notably, [the Covid 19 pandemic](#) "had a particularly negative impact on children and young people, with the impact exacerbated for those groups already at risk of poorer mental health and wellbeing".
- The Children's Commissioner for England has seen "an absolute explosion of mental health issues" since 2021.

- The Times [Health Commission](#) recommends that – alongside school-based support, hubs, drop-ins and early intervention – “the real aim should be to stop young people needing professional help. There must be greater emphasis on developing emotional resilience to cope with the ordinary pressures of life. This means encouraging activities such as sport, drama, and volunteering as part of a more rounded education.”

There’s a clear demand for complementary mental health-informed provision to help to address service gaps and to meet individual needs relating to vulnerability, anxiety, struggle, isolation and life stresses. Awards Plus 1:1 Mentoring meets this need through early intervention and in recovery plans (rather than points of crisis at which specialist help is most appropriate). It’s a working model that supports re-connection, confidence building and progressive achievement with a trusted adult.

*“They give you a helping hand, motivate and encourage you.
I’ve always got the impression that they genuinely care and are invested in my journey.
They are patient and understanding, I really appreciate all that they have done and helped me with.”*

Opportunity

Many of the young people we work with are not currently engaged in formal education or employment for reasons related to their mental health. Youth awards can feel unattainable when struggling with motivation, anxiety or self-esteem. There’s a need to hold open doors to opportunities which might otherwise seem closed.

*“I was thrilled when I got the opportunity.
As an unemployed, not in education young person it gave me a sense of purpose and a reason to get up in the morning.
It gave me goals to strive for and really improved my mental health.”*



The last 3 years of funding have created possibilities which would not have existed without it. Wildlife residentials on the Isle of Arran, sailing on a tall ship to the Netherlands, Pentlands expeditions, parent-free explorations of Jupiter Artland, completing a Duke of Edinburgh’s Award Section at the third go, finding an interest in military history, building walking confidence by orienteering around Holyrood Park for an Out There Award, volunteering to help disabled horse riders, discovering the nearby nature of the Water of Leith as part of a John Muir Award, Proxy Walks (making walks for others) in the shale Bings of West Lothian, finding latent drawing skills by sketching Dalkeith Country Park trees, working towards a Lowland Leader qualification, attending an Edinburgh Festival Fringe show for the first time...

Such experiences might be daunting for many young people. Set in a context of difficult mental health the prospect can feel insurmountable. A combination of sensitive mentoring, effective links with partners, and financial support, helps young people find they are capable of much more than they know. Memories have been created, personal achievements gained, lives changed for the better.

"I have witnessed for myself the difference that this project makes not only to the young people they work with but their families too. For some, it has been transformational.

Working with Awards Plus/FOTA towards the awards has provided them with an opportunity to transition from mental health services to the community. Being able to access a range of activities and develop skills can help them discover interests and develop skills that can stay with them into later life. There is also the opportunity to develop social skills and build relationships that they can take beyond their involvement with either CAMHS or Awards Plus. The benefit of this cannot and must not be underestimated.

This 1:1 Mentoring can be a stepping stone, introducing experiences that can help contribute to recovery, sense of mastery and wellbeing."

Julie Blackwood, Occupational Therapy Team Lead, CAMHS

What's next?

Mental health support is set out as core activity and a priority in the Awards Plus [2023-25 Strategy](#). Doing more, effectively, requires 3–5-year funding.

To provide stable, trauma-informed support takes time. For young people with mental health difficulties, perhaps due to adverse childhood experiences, trust and rapport are fundamental. Staff continuity is key and requires medium to long-term funding to sustain it. Setting 1:1 Mentoring as core Awards Plus activity – integrated with expeditions and nature-based youth awards expertise – shifts a short-term 'project-based' outlook to a longer-term approach to better meet the needs of both young people and partners.

Priorities are to:

- maintain a current (flexible) 1:1 Mentoring caseload of 30-50 young people, extending this with further funding and capacity.
- apply longer-term perspectives to relationships with young people, CAMHS and referral agencies, funders and partners, and to Awards Plus staffing, with the aim of creating more qualitative impact.
- develop and expand an 'Early Intervention' model with schools and youth organisations to assist with growing waiting lists for help.
- demonstrate and champion good practice in supporting excluded and under-represented young people, in relation to mental health support and co-design/co-production, outdoor learning, Learning for Sustainability, youth awards, residential, nature connectedness.

Want to know more? Inspired to help fund our work?

We'd love to hear from you. Contact heather.hughes@awardsplus.org.uk.

Awards Plus 1:1 Mentoring supported by



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