



Building Sustainable Communities August 2016-June 2021



Down to Earth Project Evaluation Report - January 2022



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“Building Sustainable Communities” Headlines

With five years of Our Bright Future funding, here is what we achieved.

- **784** Young People worked with Building Sustainable Communities
- **495** Young People achieved accreditation: 75% of all young people engaged
- **540** Young People improved their knowledge of Education for Sustainable Development and Global Citizenship
- **397** Young People with increased well-being
- **35** local, regional and national organisations involved in “Building Sustainable Communities”



Eleven new community buildings and structures created

- Traditional Timber Frame Barn and completion of a Round Pole Training Centre: North Gower
- Valleys Kids Residential Centre and services barn: North Gower
- New office and community training space: Murton, Gower
- Six eco restorative social housing homes: Pennard, Gower



Special thanks to those who put us in the spotlight and supported “Building Sustainable Communities”

Key Influencers

- First Minister of Wales, Mark Drakeford
- Leader of the Labour Party and Leader of the Opposition, Sir Keir Starmer
- Welsh Minister of Finance and Local Government, Member of the Senedd Gower, Rebecca Evans
- Welsh Minister for Climate Change, Member of the Senedd Swansea West, Julie James
- Labour Member of Parliament for Gower, Tonia Antoniazzi
- Labour Member of Parliament Swansea East, Carolyn Harris
- Former First Minister of Wales, Carwyn Jones
- City and County of Swansea Deputy Council Leader and Cabinet Member for Climate Change, Andrea Lewis
- Wales Director National Lottery Community Fund, John Rose



OBF Project Publicity

- Countryfile
- ITV Wales
- BBC Wales
- ITV Wonders of the Coastal Path
- ITV Coast and Country
- BBC My Life: Build Me Up



Access all of these at: <https://downtoearthproject.org.uk/videos/>



Executive Summary

Our Bright Future

Our Bright Future is a £33m programme of 31 individual projects across the UK that brings together the environmental and youth sectors. Projects are being delivered by organisations across the environmental and youth sectors, united by the common aim of empowering young people (aged 11-24) to lead future environmental change. “Building Sustainable Communities” was one of 31 projects funded as part of the Our Bright Future programme by the National Lottery Community Fund.

“Building Sustainable Communities”

Through our “Building Sustainable Communities” project, Down to Earth (DTE) provided remarkable opportunities for Young People (17-24 years old) to develop both themselves and their local communities and environment through sustainable construction and green training programmes. Between August 2016 and June 2021, we supported Young People to develop their own skills and get them ready for the green economy through accredited training programmes in sustainable construction whilst, at the same time, building their own sustainable community infrastructure. Starting with highly supported, accredited training in sustainable construction on a “live” community-based construction site alongside practical, innovative, green skills development, the Young People were supported to build sustainable buildings on sites in their own communities, such as community training centres and social housing. Working alongside highly qualified DTE Facilitators, applying a person-centred, peer support, standardised approach, Young People came together to increase their self-confidence, improve their well-being, connect with their communities and engage with the natural world to learn more about their environment. This project has had a societal, economic and environmental impact through a solutions-based approach to tackling climate change with the people who will be most impacted by it: the most impoverished and marginalised Young People.

“Building Sustainable Communities” offered an extraordinary opportunity for ‘hard to reach’ Young People to construct cutting-edge, sustainable buildings - and for these buildings to become a unique community resource. Not only have the groups build low carbon buildings, they have demonstrated the viability of a community response to the challenges of social inequality, sustainable development and climate change by literally taking the future into their own hands. Through this approach the project has not only lead to increased opportunities for ‘hard to reach’ groups but will also increase community cohesion as well as tackling poverty.

What we achieved with Young People

Working with 35 different local organisations, we have provided 784 Young People from the hardest to reach groups in our communities with training opportunities and experiences. A total of 495 of these Young People achieved accreditation in a range of skills whilst engaging them in the construction of remarkable community buildings and built environment spaces, eleven in total over five years. A number of these Young People have moved on to employment, further training opportunities and further education after participation in one of our OBF programmes. Over the years, several of these Young People have joined us for a follow up programme to further develop their skills and engage with another sustainable construction community build.



Engaging Young People in their communities and environment

Many of the Young People we worked with on this project commented on the way we build and the difference in our approach to that of conventional construction companies. Referral agency feedback affirms that attendance on the programmes has increased environmental awareness in a minimum of 75% of participants. This awareness and our hands on approach to meaningful, practical activities in the outdoors, has introduced increased engagement with concepts of sustainable development and climate change. The completion of six eco-restorative social housing units, a two-story residential centre, a workshop and barn, a new office block and community meeting room in addition to four built environment spaces in the community, has given the Young People involved practical experience in sustainable construction and a sense of value in being involved in something that will leave a legacy for the local community.

Down to Earth

Down to Earth is an award-winning social enterprise with a 16-year track record both in working with very vulnerable, 'hard to reach' groups and also in successfully delivering large Big Lottery funded projects. Based on two sites on the Gower Peninsula, Down to Earth was created to offer life-changing opportunities to the most disadvantaged people in our communities through innovative and sustainable ways of being outdoors. We believe inequality and social justice can only be tackled through embracing a sustainable, low carbon economy which brings out the best in people. Our existing two sites, developed and constructed with our participants, show this is possible.

Monitoring and Evaluation

We have over 11 years of clinical research data working with groups that have informed the development of our own well-being monitoring measures. We believe in evidence-based ways of working and this is underpinned by objective academic and clinical research. By ensuring project work is objectively researched and evaluated, dissemination and impact can be confidently scaled.

Analysis of the results derived from monitoring OBF participants over five years has shown that engaging in a 6–8-week programme can improve feelings of well-being, reduce clinical depression and anxiety and enhance social connections for Young People.

OBF Young People were involved in two unique research studies as part of this project. Results from these studies not only inform our own ways of working with hard-to-reach groups but will support other organisations providing interventions and services for a range of groups in our communities.

Project aim and outcomes

The aim of "Building Sustainable Communities" was to provide remarkable opportunities for Young People (17-24 years old) to develop both themselves and their local communities/environment through sustainable construction and green skills training programmes. The hard work of the delivery team over the last 5 years and the incredible organisational and logistical effort of our Project Manager has been the contributing factor in Down to Earth meeting our stated aim. Together with the support of local referral agencies who have seen the tangible evidence of the efficacy of our approach in working with 'hard to reach' Young People, we have continued to provide face to face learning and training opportunities in a time of very few jobs or opportunities for Young People. It is very rewarding to have an opportunity to engage and progress people that are taking positive steps to gain experience and skills.

Covid

The obvious challenges of providing face to face support and training during a global pandemic have brought us together as a team to innovate new ways of delivery and operation in the current



climate. The majority of our participants are considered vulnerable, and an enormous amount of work and effort went into ensuring that we can provide safe, enjoyable training opportunities during this unprecedented time. During the last 18 months of the project, as a result of Covid-19 safety measures and government regulation, many referral agencies that we traditionally use to recruit OBF participants, have still not recommenced face to face service provision, making recruitment even more problematic. Delivery of the programmes during Covid-19 restrictions, has led to recruitment of and engagement with smaller group numbers and sizes to ensure social distancing. When national lockdown was lifted, we were the first community service provider in our region to recommence working face to face with groups and our OBF participants.



I can't believe I've actually helped to make something like this. This is the biggest thing I've ever achieved and I'm glad I've done it.

- Our Bright Future Participant

“Building Sustainable Communities”

Over the last five years, “Building Sustainable Communities” has enabled young people to, quite literally, take the future of their communities into their own hands. From August 2016 to June 2021, our project offered an extraordinary opportunity for ‘hard to reach’ Young People to construct cutting-edge, sustainable buildings - and for these buildings to become a unique community resource.

Down to Earth

Down to Earth is a social enterprise with a 16-year track record in providing life changing healthcare and education programmes through the medium of outdoor sustainable construction and land management. The organisation was created specifically to support ‘hard to reach’ and disadvantaged groups through practical, sustainability activities which are designed to improve well-being and engagement in education and learning. Using the outdoors, we provide learning and development opportunities through short and long-term educational and healthcare programmes including traditional and sustainable construction, adventure activities, sustainable land management and cooking and eating together.

We have over 11 years of clinical research data working with groups that have informed the development of our own well-being monitoring measures. We believe in evidence-based ways of working and this is underpinned by objective academic and clinical research. By ensuring project work is objectively researched and evaluated, dissemination and impact can be confidently scaled. We have two main sites where we deliver programmes to groups. Our original base in Murton, Gower, South Wales was developed from a bracken and bramble covered 4.5-acre field since 2005 to the beautiful site in the pictures below. All buildings and site development on site have been created with our groups. In 2016, just as we started the “Building Sustainable Communities” project, we opened our second site on North Gower, Little Bryn Gwyn. This project was the precursor to our OBF funded projects and helped establish the knowledge base that enabled us to expand our practice and create beautiful buildings with our groups for other funded projects and clients.





Figure 1: Down to Earth site at Murton, Gower, South Wales



Figure 2: Down to Earth site at Little Bryn Gwyn, North Gower, South Wales

The legacy we built together for our communities

The legacy of this project is twofold: the number of people we have engaged with and provided new opportunities and experiences for and the innovative buildings we have created with Young People.

One of the true successes of this project and the legacy of “Building Sustainable Communities” is the array of innovative, eco restorative buildings that have been designed and developed and built with and for Young People in our communities. OBF participants have had the unique opportunity to engage with, learn and develop community buildings built with sustainable construction techniques and natural and locally sourced materials in some of the most beautiful areas of Wales.

Working with natural, locally sourced materials primes the question of why we build the way we do and the comparison with conventional construction. The design of our buildings, such as the installation of a green roof, to work with nature focuses discussions on how humans impact the



natural world and other ways of living our lives. The environments we work in, the spaces we create together with YP shows what we can do to make a difference in the world we live in.

Working outdoors and delivering practical, meaningful engagement not only provides a different environment for YP to experience and learn in, it brings them closer to nature and gives them the opportunity, space and time to explore environmental themes and issues. We continuously converse and share knowledge with our YP on the OBF programmes; however, we let our ways of working and engaging YP prompt these discussions. We have found that when the learning and curiosity about the natural world come from the YP, this can develop into an eagerness to pursue and explore different attitudes and behaviours towards the environment.

Our innovative approach to working with hard-to-reach groups is person centred and focused on inclusivity. Through this project, we designed, developed and delivered a series of 'Group Friendly Drawings' for the participants. This enabled the Young People to take an enhanced lead on the construction of the various builds we worked on during "Building Sustainable Communities". The drawings were designed in such a way that through a series of simple pictures and diagrams, OBF participants were able to assess how the structure was to be built and what resources were needed. These drawings were a huge success for the groups, allowing them to understand the process and empower them to put the plans into action, with the support of DTE facilitators.

Traditional Timber Frame Barn and completion of a Round Pole Training Centre

As discussed previously, Little Bryn Gwyn is the second Down to Earth site on Gower. OBF participants helped complete the final stages of building this training centre and entirely built the workshop and barn, based on the site, to prepare for the work that would go into the creation of the Valley's Kids Residential Centre and services barn.



Clockwise from upper left: Figure 3: Little Bryn Gwyn Training Centre and OBF Participants; Figure 4: OBF Participant using clay plaster on external training centre walls; Figure 5: Timber frame barn/workshop at Little Bryn Gwyn



Valleys Kids Residential Centre and Service Barn

We partnered with Valleys Kids in 2014 to create our Little Bryn Gwyn Training Centre. This partnership was further extended to create a 30-bed residential centre and services building for the charity. A short film about OBF participants and their experience working with the project is available here: "What DTE means to our participants": <https://downtoearthproject.org.uk/videos/>



Figure 6: Valleys Kids residential Centre and Service barn, North Gower from the view of the LBG terrace
Figure 7: OBF participants install sheep wool insulation in internal walls of residential centre

New office/community training space building

This building was designed and built by OBF participants over 25 weeks. It was also filmed as part of a CBBC iPlayer series call 'Build me Up'.



Figure 8: Filming with Nine Lives Media for the BBC programme, My Life: Build Me Up
Figure 9: New office and community training space built by OBF participants as part of the Eco Build programme.

Six Eco-restorative, social housing homes on Gower

In partnership with Coastal Housing, DTE and OBF participants were involved from prefabrication of wall panels to the onsite construction of six social housing homes. These homes were constructed to the highest standard, using locally sourced and sustainable resources and gave participants the opportunity to see what can be achievable and what the potential of social housing can be. One of the OBF participants commented:

"I keep thinking, I can't believe we're building someone's home (not house)"

-OBF participant on the social housing build





Figure 10: Celebration Day for completion of Social Housing homes with OBF participants, June 2021

Figure 11: Young People working on the battening and cladding of external walls for social housing

Engaging Young People with the environment: understanding sustainable development and future challenges of climate change

Down to Earth understands that tackling poverty is directly related to sustainable development. We recognise that without sustainable development it is the most disadvantaged who are most impacted and will experience the greatest challenges of climate change. These are the reasons that DTE was created, to support the most disadvantaged and the most vulnerable in educational and healthcare, innovate in sustainable ways of doing things and improve well-being.

In a post monitoring survey of referral agency workers representing 170 Young People who had attended an OBF programme, 75% of the YP had demonstrated post programme that their awareness of environmental issues had increased. Through the work we do and the projects we work on, Young People engage with the concepts of sustainable development and learn ways that we can work practically together as communities to build resilience and mitigate the impacts of climate change.

Working with natural, locally sourced materials primes the question of why we build the way we do and the comparison with conventional construction. The design of our buildings, such as the installation of a green roof, to work with nature focuses discussions on how humans impact the natural world and other ways of living our lives. The environments we work in, the spaces we create together with YP shows what we can do to make a difference in the world we live in.

Each Young Person also participates in a session of Education for Sustainable Development and Global Citizenship where they look at how our work ties into wider themes of environmental education and our place in the world.

Getting Young People out and about in nature, to a variety of different settings demonstrate that there are many ways to be outdoors and engage with their natural environment. Programmes are principally run from either one of the Down to Earth sites or the location of the sustainable building being constructed. However, to ensure inclusivity and diversity of learning, Facilitators deliver at least one of the weekly sessions from a woodland or coastal area. We also incorporate adventure activities into this session to show that there are many ways to enjoy the outdoors, for vocational or recreational purposes. From our experience, we know that taking a Young Person out of a 'traditional' or mainstream learning environment and engaging them in an outdoor environment not only has significant impacts on their ability and desire to learn, but also on their behaviour and the



way they see themselves and others. We know (and the research evidences) that being in a natural environment improves well-being, physical, emotional and mental health. Getting the opportunity to share this knowledge and experience with Young People is one of the most rewarding aspects of the project.



*It soothed my anxiety,
challenged my
expectations of myself and
my abilities and gave me a
sense of pride in looking
after our environment and
being sustainable.*

-OBF Participant

Figure 12: OBF group in local heritage woodlands, Gower

Diversity of 6–8-week training programmes

The standardised 6–8-week programmes have been intentionally developed over a number of years to engage, increase confidence and build upon that confidence to try different things in the outdoors and learn new skills.

In addition to the focus of sustainable construction and development of practical skills, groups engage weekly in different activities such as green woodwork, pyrography, team building activities, and sustainable land and woodland management. One of the weekly sessions is devoted to an adventure activity such as coasteering or rock climbing. This session is delivered towards the end of the programme and builds upon participants’ increased confidence levels to try something completely different. Support and encouragement from the team that have come together as one over the duration of the course enables participants to push themselves that little bit further and celebrate their newfound confidence. The pride in themselves and each other at accomplishing something that has pushed them to the limits or out of their normal day to day comfort zone gives them such a sense of achievement that stays with them long after the programme has finished.



*Biggest change for the participants
was the improvement in
communication skills and their
confidence grew with each session.
Majority of learners become less
judgemental of others as they were
'all in it together' and some learners
would have 'unexpected' skills which
was surprising in some cases.*-Referral
Agency Support Worker

Figure 13: OBF participants coasteering on Gower



Practical skills development and accreditation

Skills development and accreditation of skills that can be used to engage in a green economy or gain employment in environmental jobs was a cornerstone of this project. Many of the Young People that we worked with on this project had been excluded from mainstream education, weren't in training or employment of any form and lacked qualifications to gain meaningful employment or engage with training and higher education. As an Agored Cymru registered centre, we have been delivering accredited courses to our participants for over 12 years. Supporting Young People to gain this accreditation not only provided them with proof of skills development, it enhances their confidence in their ability to achieve in a learning environment, where they may previously have none. Additionally, Young People have fed back that they now know what area of work they would like to aspire to; broadens their horizons and demonstrate to themselves their potential.

Over the years of bringing groups to Down to Earth, the most important part of the experience has been the feeling of being valued. Many of our participants have said they have enjoyed their time with Down to Earth and learning in a different way, not just on the subject of construction but the environment and sustainability, land management, and animal care.

-Engagement Officer with local training provider

Throughout the five years of the project, Young People achieved accreditation in one or more of the following Agored Cymru courses.

- Taster Woodwork Levels 1,2,3
- Work Experience
- Health and Safety in a Practical Environment
- Lime Rendering
- Cob Wall Construction
- Heritage and Traditional Craft

The weeks that I have spent with Down to Earth has been an amazing experience. Not only did I learn new skills but I had the opportunity to interact with others. They create a fun learning environment and are really supportive.

- OBF Participant



Figure 14: OBF participants working on the residential centre

Building personal and social skills

The number one improvement that Referral Agencies report back to us is the increase in confidence and self-esteem amongst Young People. It is this increase that leads them to engage further, developing new skills, trying new experiences, making new friends. The diversity of programmes means that Young People also engage in a number of different experience activities such as



Sustainable Woodland Management where Young People work in the woods to learn more about the environment and sustainable development. Here they work with and learn to use fire as a tool and cut down trees that are later repurposed back at site. Additionally, Young People get the opportunity to attend a coasteering or rock-climbing session towards the end of the programme. The final session of the programme brings the team together for a celebration and tree climb. These additional experiences are vehicles to instil even further levels of confidence, teamwork and peer support.

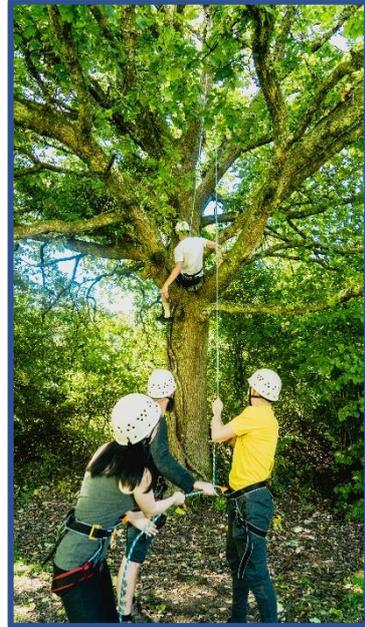


Figure 15: OBF participant rock climbing on Gower

Figure 16: OBF participant cooking over fire

Figure 17: Tree climb for last day of OBF programme

Both Young People and Referral Agency workers have fed back to us one of the most important issues we address through our programmes is the opportunity to meet new people, reduce social isolation and make new friendships.

Working with Young People and Nine Lives Media on the filming for the BBC, attending an extended programme, demonstrated acutely the potential that YP have to form strong bonds with their fellow team members and that having the safe space to develop these bonds equates to longer lasting friendships and extended support from networks on a longer term. The team of Young People engaged in this project is shown below.





Figure 18: The Eco Build team: BBC My Life: Build Me Up

Clinical Research Monitoring and Evaluation

With over 11 years of evidence-based research to support our approach, DTE have a standardised monitoring system that tracks participants for change and impact throughout the programmes. For the OBF project, we used three different self-reporting, monitoring measures: a Community Connection scale, a four question PHQ to assess levels of anxiety and depression and an Emoji questionnaire to examine well-being levels. These three measures are delivered during the second and seventh weeks of an eight-week programme to all participants. Group facilitators also make weekly notes about progress made and points of interest of participants. At the end of the programme, participants are asked to write out a few comments about the programme. Collectively, this data gathered informs us to report against agreed funding outcomes.

Post monitoring questionnaires of both practical and soft skills gained during the programme and continued influence on self-confidence and well-being after the programme, were completed by nine of the 35 Referral Agencies to assess the impact of participating in an OBF programme with Down to Earth.

We have seen first-hand the impact that our OBF programmes have on Young People. We hear from Referral Agencies, parents, cares, social workers of the benefit to their well-being that regular attendance and participation has had on YP. The research data and findings and specifically the research paper, provide hard evidence of the efficacy of our approach in working with Young People.

Analysis and evaluation of the data from “Building Sustainable Communities” has been conducted and will be included with this evaluation report. Results, shown below in figure that there were substantial increases in positive emotions such as ‘Connected to others’ and ‘Valued’. Increases were recorded in all positive emotions monitored. There are also decreases in negative emotions such as ‘Lonely’, ‘Sad’, ‘Failure’, ‘Anxious’ and ‘Bored’. An in-depth analysis of the complete data set needs to occur before further findings are analysed and determine how these findings impact and influence our delivery of future projects.

I got kicked out of school in year 8. No qualifications, no education, nothing. This is the first place I've felt appreciated in 10 years.-OBF participant



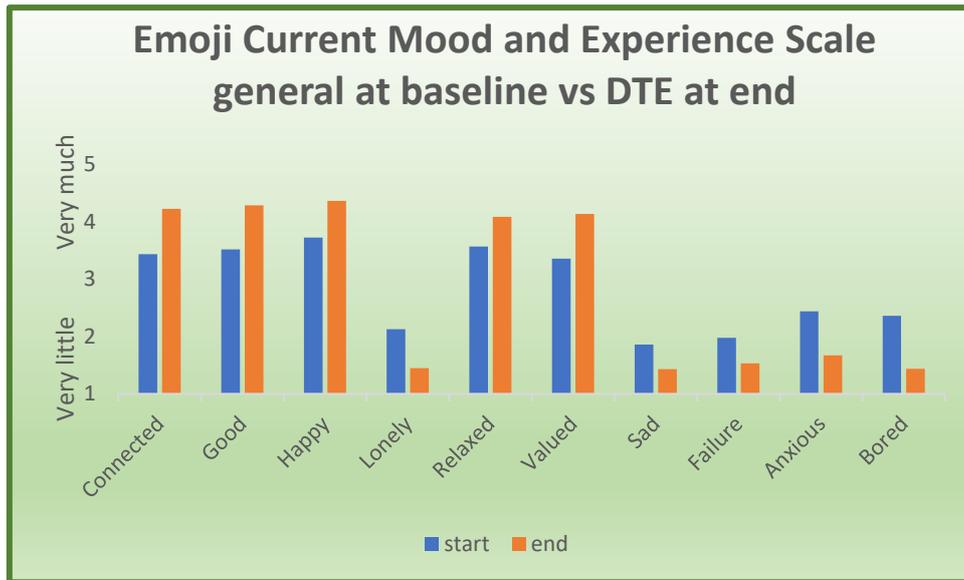


Figure 19: Emoji Current Mood and Experience Scale general at baseline vs. DTE at end

Regarding social connectedness and how connected Young People felt to their communities, our results showed that from initial engagement, there was over a 30% increase in how connected to their communities and Down to Earth they felt, as displayed below in figure.

At the start of the programmes, there were 63% of the sample of Young People that tested at or over the clinical threshold for anxiety and 68% for depression. By the end of the programmes, these figures reduced by 34% for anxiety and a 38% decrease for depression.

Levels of connectedness for Young People in their community: start and end of the programme

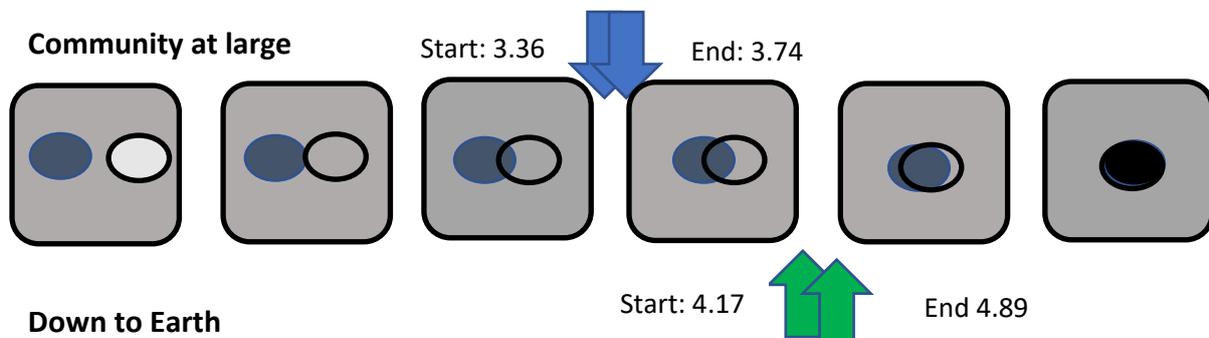


Figure 20: levels of connectedness for Young People in their community

Participation in two unique areas of clinical research with DTE

Participants on this project have been involved in two different and unique clinical research studies with Swansea University and Down to Earth. One of these research studies was published in February 2020 in the Journal of Mental Health. This paper was an examination of the impact of engaging in a brief (8 days over 8 weeks) outdoor sustainable construction project on the mental health and social connectedness of hard to reach and disadvantaged groups. Results of this study showed that those with poor mental health and social connection at baseline showed statistically and clinically significant improvements in depression, anxiety, resilience and social connection by the end of the programme. It was concluded that engagement in a group based sustainable construction



project can provide significant mental health and social benefits to a range of vulnerable and hard to reach groups with difficulties in these areas. As discussed in Clinical Research: monitoring and evaluation, the results of analysis of the entire dataset from this project supports this conclusion.

A second paper submitted for review for publication also involved OBF participants. The aim of this piece of research was the development of a more inclusive monitoring measure for our participants. A large number of assessment measures exist but the length of these scales can make them impractical for use where time is short or when assessing those with difficulties in literacy, concentration or cognitive capacity. DTE and Swansea University have developed and a very brief emoji-based tool to assess mental health, wellbeing, resilience and social connection for our participants. The need to capture the voices of those who are often excluded from clinical research monitoring and create a more equitable measure of monitoring well-being was the motivation behind this research. Results from the study showed that there was a meaningful structure to the emoji measure with validity demonstrated through relationships to existing well-being scales. Stability over time and sensitivity to change was also demonstrated. The paper concluded that the emoji-based measure provides an ultra-brief measure of mood and current experience with minimal literacy demands on participants.

Life after an OBF programme

Although it was not the aim of this project to specifically get Young People to re-engage with education and/or training, gain employment or volunteer with a community project, it is wonderful to know that DTE played a role in building confidence, skills and broadening horizons of Young People we worked with so that they may move forwards with their lives and engage with the opportunities that are there for them. We do not collect data on all of our past participants but have post participation data on 143 Young People.

- We are aware that 61 have moved into full time employment; only 2% of those jobs are part time.
- In addition to the 65 volunteers that we have worked with, an additional 13 are volunteering regularly in their community.
- A total of 63 Young People has entered into further education or training.

Key influencers engaged in “Building Sustainable Communities”

A number of government representatives, charity representatives and social housing providers have engaged with the project, speaking about the benefits of the project and the progress that we are making with Young People who are considered 'hard to reach'.

Carwyn Jones, Former Welsh First Minister, opened the training centre at Little Bryn Gwyn, North Gower in September 2016. Mark Drakeford, current Welsh First Minister has visited the residential centre constructed by Young People on the OBF project and recently visited the social housing project alongside Sir Keir Starmer, Labour Party Leader and Leader of the Opposition. Julie James, Member of the Senedd Swansea West & Minister for Climate Change and Rebecca Evans, Member of the Senedd Gower & Minister for Local Government have both visited a number of the builds being delivered by the OBF project. Member of Parliament for Gower, Tonia Antoniazzi & Member of Parliament Swansea East, Carolyn Harris have visited and spoken about a number of our builds with OBF. Additionally, Wales Director National Lottery Community Fund, John Rose has been engaged with the project since 2016. Watch Welsh FM Mark Drakeford in Development Trust Association Wales: <https://downtoearthproject.org.uk/videos/>.



Aims and Outcomes: did we achieve what we said we would?

This project centred around meeting the four original themes of the funding.

- Theme 1: Enabling Young People to gain new skills relevant to finding jobs, training, volunteering opportunities, or starting entrepreneurial projects that contribute to the green economy
- Theme 2: Engaging Young People with their environment; inspiring and enabling action
- Theme 3: Inspiring communities about the environment and stimulating action and community cohesion
- Theme 4: Achieving a net gain in the built and natural environment across rural and urban settings

1: Our project provided accredited training opportunities for 495 Young People in sustainable construction and green entrepreneurial skills.

2. Our project engaged Young People in their environment through practical, outdoor based sustainable construction projects and adventure experiences which inspired Young People on the programme to engage with their local community and environment.

3. This project was centred on inspiring and engaging ways of tackling the challenges on the environment through practical, community led solutions using the sustainable methods available. This is delivered through our accredited training programmes with engagement on 'live' community builds. Action on this theme was additionally highlighted in the BBC partnership episode of "This is My Life: Build Me Up". This TV programme highlighted the experiences of a diverse group of vulnerable Young People over nine months who came together to learn about the environment, gain accredited skills in sustainable construction and construct a beautiful community building using natural materials and sustainable methods.

4. This project created innovative, sustainable community infrastructure that provided a net benefit to the natural environment in both rural and urban settings. The buildings created over the 5 years have specifically met this theme.

From the four themes, the aim of "Building Sustainable Communities" and four project outcomes were developed.

What was the aim of "Building Sustainable Communities" and was it achieved?

The aim of this project was to provide remarkable opportunities for Young People (17-24 years old) to develop both themselves and their local communities/environment through sustainable construction and green skills training programmes. The project was developed to support Young People to develop their own skills and get them ready for the green economy through accredited training programmes in sustainable construction whilst, at the same time, building their own sustainable community infrastructure.

Down to Earth has achieved its original aim with this project. Through the provision of accredited training opportunities and experiences provided 784 Young People from the hardest to reach groups with training opportunities and experiences. 495 of these Young People achieved accreditation in a range of skills whilst engaging them in the construction of remarkable community buildings and built environment spaces. A number of these Young People have moved on to employment, further



training opportunities and further education after participation in one of our OBF programmes. Over the years, several of these Young People have joined us for a follow up programme to further develop their skills and engage with another sustainable construction community build. many of the Young People have commented on the way we build and the difference in our approach to that of conventional construction companies. Referral agency feedback affirms that attendance on the programmes has increased environmental awareness in a minimum of 75% of participants. This awareness and our hands on approach to meaningful, practical activities in the outdoors, has introduced increased engagement with concepts of sustainable development and climate change. The completion of 6 eco-restorative social housing units, a 2-story residential centre, a workshop and barn, a new office block and community meeting room in addition to 4 built environment spaces in the community, has given the Young People involved practical experience in sustainable construction and a sense of value in being involved in something that will leave a legacy for the local community.

Project outcomes

The project outcomes and indicators are displayed below in table 1.

Project Outcomes	End of project totals
Outcome 1: 920 Young People gaining accredited training opportunities in sustainable construction and green entrepreneurship through "real life" sustainable construction sites; with 533 Young People gaining accreditation.	784 Young People provided with the opportunity to gain training opportunities in sustainable construction. 495 Young People accredited in sustainable construction and work experience.
Outcome 2: 533 Young People gaining increased self-confidence and wellbeing through practical, hands on, outdoor based activities.	397 Young People have been tracked throughout the project for increased well-being, this is 74% of the target for this outcome. Complete data was available for 195 Young People. The data shows a general increase in well-being across the sample. <i>Please see Clinical Research Monitoring and Evaluation for method and further detail.</i>
Outcome 3: 533 Young People improving their understanding of 'sustainable development' and 'climate change' through practical, solutions-based approaches	533 Young People improved their understanding of 'sustainable development' and 'climate change' through practical, solutions-based approaches.
Outcome 4: At least five 'zero carbon' or 'eco-restorative' community buildings created through the above outcomes using only the most sustainable and locally sourced construction methods.	11 zero carbon/eco restorative community buildings.

Table 1: Project outcomes and outputs for "Building Sustainable Communities"

Outcome 1

Since project commencement, Building Sustainable Communities has provided 784 Young People with the opportunity to gain training opportunities in sustainable construction through our 6–8-week programmes. Of this number, 664 Young People (85% of those attending) have engaged in two or more sessions with the project. We have achieved 85% of the original target for this outcome.495



Young People have been accredited in sustainable construction and work experience since project commencement. The project has achieved 93% of this outcome.



The majority of clients who attended Down to Earth have gone on to gain employment following on from the support they received and the skills/increased confidence they gained by taking part in the programme.

**-Communities for Work
Engagement Officer**

Figure 21: Teamwork: OBF participants working on the social housing build

Outcome 2

All of our groups have benefitted in many different ways not only learning new skills but feeling respected and valued through the opportunity to give something a go with the expert support and encouragement from Down to Earth Facilitators. Increased confidence and self-belief have been an outcome theme throughout the programmes, many of the participants have gone on to gain employment after their time with Down to Earth, many in construction and others elsewhere, they have often had more confidence and motivation and were able to find employment.

A total of 397 Young People have been tracked throughout the project for increased well-being, this is 74% of the target for this outcome. Of this number, complete data was provided for 195 participants, tracked at the beginning and end of the programmes. The average age of participants was 18 ½ years old with the majority being male with 21 % female. Overall, clinical research monitoring evidences that well-being for the sample improved. There was a 28% reduction in the number of participants self-reporting at or above the screening point for anxiety and depression between the start and end of the programmes. Qualitative feedback from referral agency workers and participants and post monitoring of a small sample of participants (n=143) details how self-confidence has improved in individuals through engagement in the project. The feedback and post monitoring demonstrates the impact that increased confidence and well-being are having on Young People to gain new skills and move on to further training, education, volunteering or employment.

All participants tried new things and learnt new skills. It was great for increasing their confidence and self-esteem and also for team working. They



***all said they would like to do it all again if they could. -Early Intervention
Psychosis Ward Manager Swansea Bay University Health Board***



Figure 22: OBF participants: Social connections made and friendships developed

Best bit of this project, the confidence they've given me. Trying new things, learning how to use tools I haven't used before, and meeting these guys in the group. I've loved it all. - OBF participant Nov 2020

Through our monitoring, we were also able to show how engagement with “Building Sustainable Communities” improved how connected to their communities Young People felt over the course of the programme. There was an 18% increase across the entire sample in how connected to others Young People felt and an increase of over 30% in how connected Young People felt to their community, to Down to Earth and the friends they had made here over the duration of the programmes.

Outcome 3

540 Young People have an improved understanding of sustainable development and climate change through participation in one of our programmes or camps. This means that we have achieved and surpassed the target for this outcome.

Feedback from Referral Agency Workers and participants provide an example of the hands on, practical learning and training that has improved their understanding of sustainable development and climate change. The way we build, how we build and who we build with provides a perfect platform for sharing this knowledge and learning experiences. Young People have actively engaged with these concepts and reported that they are cascading this knowledge through their friends, families and wider networks.

One of the most important issues that DTE address with these programmes is the need to increase knowledge on sustainable living and how to embed those practices into everyday life.

- Referral Agency Worker with local training provider



I am proud to have done this, learning new ways to live more environmentally friendly, help the community and someone's going to actually live there. I helped put it up-it's a legacy. -OBF participant



Figure 23: OBF participant and DTE Facilitator working on pre-fabrication of wall panels for social housing

Our programmes and approach to working with 'hard to reach' groups is about learning new skills and gaining new experiences through meaningful, practical activity. We use innovative and inclusive approaches such as creating remarkable buildings with natural materials to communicate knowledge around sustainable development and what we can do to mitigate and build resilience to the impacts of climate change. Education for Sustainable Development and Global Citizenship is included as additional and supplementary learning to the daily sessions.

Through working with natural materials to sustainably construct our eco restorative community buildings, Young People see hands on the benefit of sourcing locally and using natural materials in construction. Understanding how the buildings have been designed to work with nature and ensure maximum energy efficiency evidences for Young People the potential of constructing this way. Through working together with the community to construct these beautiful spaces, participants witness and experience the advantage to working with fellow community members to build a legacy and how this contributes to community cohesion and sustainable development.

Outcome 4

With “Building Sustainable Communities”, participants have created 11 zero carbon/eco restorative community buildings for the local community in which these Young People live.

All these remarkable buildings have been fully built with Welsh timber, natural insulation, green roof systems or locally sourced material such a Tata steel.

- Traditional Timber Frame Barn and completion of a Round Pole Training Centre: Both these builds provided the facilities to develop the concept of Young People getting involved in sustainable construction.
- Valleys Kids residential Centre and Service Barn builds: These buildings were developed from concept to completion and 100% built by the OBF Participants.
- New office/training space building: This building was designed and built by OBF participants. It was also filmed as part of a CBBC iPlayer series call 'Build me Up'.
- 6 social Housing homes: These 6 homes were built by OBF participants over a 12-month contract.



We acknowledge that not all of the targets for the outcomes were attained; with a number of contributing factors identified, not least Covid. However, we also focus on the fact that we were able to provide programmes for and support a significant number of Young People from some of the hardest to reach groups to gain confidence and practical skills, improve their wellbeing and connection to their communities, and be part of creating innovative new community spaces that represent the legacy of this project. Surpassing the target indicators for two of the outcomes has demonstrated the commitment of the Down to Earth OBF project team to overcome the adversities and barriers resulting from the global pandemic and focus on the aim of the project, to provide remarkable opportunities for Young People (17-24 years old) to develop both themselves and their local communities and environment through sustainable construction and green entrepreneur training programmes.



Figure 24: Creating beautiful spaces with remarkable groups of Young People

Case study of an OBF participant

C.D. joined the project in 2018 as a client of a local referral agency working with ex-offenders. He was 20 years old at the time and his story goes along to convey what this project is all about. This study was completed by the Lead Facilitator working with C'D's group.



C.D came to Down to Earth on a one day a week eight-week program with a group of young people from an ex-offenders' organisation. Although C.D is still relatively young, he has already faced a considerable amount of adversity in his life. This has led to him struggling with self-confidence issues and a high level of anxiety. When C.D came to Down to Earth he had no previous construction experience to speak of and was very nervous about being in a group environment especially as he knew no one else in the group.

Quickly though, and after some initial engagement and guidance, he started to push out of his comfort zone and fully embraced every task he was presented with. This included working on a live construction site using a variety of hand/ power tools which required a lot of attention to detail and a considerable amount of focus on the best and safest practice for using power tools. Soon C.D started to emerge as a member of the group that others would look to for guidance on tasks he was competent at. He also started to encourage and help others that were in need of extra support, not just practically, but also helping others to improve their self-confidence and belief, mainly through leading by example.

Soon after starting the program C.D quickly came to realise that although he had no previous construction experience it was actually something he really enjoyed and began to look at options of how he could progress further personally within the construction industry. After having casual conversations with myself and others about the various options available to him he used his own initiative and went away to do some research. Two weeks later he came on session and told me that he had applied to a local college and wanted to study a course in structural engineering as this aspect of construction appealed to him most. He also told me that he had already been for an interview with the course tutor and subsequently has been excepted to start on the course in September 2018.

What we have learned from “Building Sustainable Communities”

DTE was created to engage the hardest to reach groups and whilst we had run large scale funded projects to work with these groups, this was our largest scale, funded project working specifically with Young People between the ages of 16-24 years old. With the focus of this project being around working on “live” sustainable construction builds, 16 years old was the lowest legal age to be training on a “live” build. Working with this age group inspired the concept of the project to provide Young People with remarkable experiences and opportunities to develop both themselves and their local communities and environment through sustainable construction and green skills training programmes. Being involved in this project enabled Young People to better understand and explore practical solutions for a green economy and demonstrated how they can explore opportunities and training for environmental jobs.

Engaging hard to reach groups of Young People

Over the five years, we have gained a great deal more experience in recruiting and engaging hard to reach groups. Hard to reach groups are often overlooked by other agencies due to challenging behaviours or specific needs. At DTE, our experience has shown that these Young People often have more to give while receiving higher personal benefits than other mainstream groups. We worked



and engaged with Referral Agencies from Neath-Port Talbot, Swansea and Carmarthenshire to recruit interested participants. There was keen interest in the project from many Young People and Agencies, however, getting them through the door to experience what we were offering proved to be a barrier to engagement in the initial stages of the project. DTE is an organisation that is not easily summed up in one sentence as we offer such a diversity of activities and deliver a multi-faceted programme and approach. OBF staff went out into the communities to recruit with Referral Agencies face to face with Young People so that they could describe the project accurately, show films about the project made with Young People on programmes, and excite interested participants with what opportunities were being offered. This targeted approach worked and participant numbers increased. This is something that we have internalised as part of our recruitment practice now, engaging with potential participants in their communities with Referral Agency support to promote our projects and engagement.

Other areas where we have struggled in recruiting Young People is from BAME support groups, female participants and individual referrals.

We worked hard to reach as many female participants as we could. We recognise that the work we were doing with the project has not traditionally been seen as an option for female young people and we have been keen to change that perception with this project. Of those who did engage with the project, female participants represented just over 26% of all engaged with the project.

We have tried to incorporate a number of different approaches to recruitment for Young People for the programme. Historically, we have worked with Referral Agencies to recruit participants and bring them to a programme with us. Individual referrals can be difficult and time consuming for staff to manage. There are also issues with transport to and from our sites if a Young Person attends without an established group. However, due to publicity through a number of television programmes and appearances on regional and national news programmes, we received a number of enquiries from individuals, parents, carers and social workers who felt that a Young Person they knew would benefit from being involved with “Building Sustainable Communities”. The OBF Facilitators were the first funded project with DTE to compile a programme for individual referrals. Although time consuming and with a number of logistics to contend with, this is an approach that we have included within our other funded programmes and has been streamlined to offer opportunities to individuals by pairing them with other Referral Agency groups.

Delivery of our programmes

Recruiting Young People to participate in programmes that run during the summer months and engaging them throughout the programme had proved to be a challenge. However, of those that did engage, the positive impact was visible. This led us to adapt our delivery schedule of programmes and explore a different approach, such as the Eco Build programme that commenced in July 2018 and ran for 25 weeks. Progress of the group and the experience of being part of the programme was captured in a programme for BBC My Life: Build Me Up.

In 2019, based on feedback from Young People, the programme delivery format was changed. This provided opportunities for those that had already engaged on short term programmes to stay in touch and re-engage. Throughout the project, we took feedback from participants and referral agencies to assess what was working well and areas that we could improve upon. We continually assess the quality of our approach and delivery of our projects and programmes to provide the best possible experience for our participant and to ensure Best Practice.



Attendance and engagement

Due to the nature of the participants that we worked with on this project, attendance can often be erratic. Our Young People may have a plethora of personal issues or situations that may arise and prevent them from attending or engaging on a weekly basis. Additionally, Referral Agencies have at times struggled to get transport to bring groups to the sites, preventing attendance. At DTE, we know that continuity and regularity of attendance of the programmes will ensure the greatest improvements and successes. Attendance impacts on our ability to deliver and a Young Person's ability to complete the accreditation that forms a key part of the programme. Weekly activities and team working are a poignant aspect of these programmes, as they enable DTE Facilitators to build weekly upon confidence levels, feels of trust for DTE staff and other group members, and a group bonding dynamic. Due to erratic attendance, it has been difficult to track participants at both the start and completion of a programme for monitoring. This has impacted upon our ability to meet targets for engagement and accreditation and accurately report on well-being and targets.

Building with external contractors

As a result of the programme, we have learnt to adopt a more flexible build schedule to adapt to unforeseen circumstances. This means that when we are building for a client in the community, we have contingency projects in the pipeline that we can action to adapt to delays and other barriers.

Project Evaluation

Down to Earth Project has been running successful projects for 16 years and has put in place feedback mechanisms across the company to ensure that the quality of work is maintained and where possible improved through an iterative process. Through this project life cycle approach, we ensured that we left time for project closure, analysing outcomes and applying lessons learnt to future projects. Not only can we see positive changes for our participants, but we now have the clinical research to back it up and thus have a much more powerful tool of persuasion when it comes to disseminating our ideas on a wider basis.

Working with Our Bright Future, Wildlife Trusts and National Lottery Fund

Over the duration of the project, we faced a number of barriers to engaging Young People in the project. What was specifically beneficial to us as an organisation was the flexibility of the funder to enable us to reconfigure our delivery programme based on feedback from Young People and Referral Agencies. Having the ability to get feedback from Young People and Support Services about what was working with delivery of the programme and then design a programme of engagement and work that provided a wider range of opportunities for Young People to re-engage on a longer-term basis to build skills and improve well-being was essential to the success of the project and aligned with our practice of Participatory Action Research.

Communication and support from Wildlife Trusts in engaging with the Green Room and Youth Forum was very much appreciated and despite not being able to engage our Young People fully in these areas, for a number of reasons, it was not due to lack of enthusiasm to engage our project from either Wildlife Trusts or DTE. We would specifically like to thank Cath Hare for the support and guidance afforded to us in delivering, monitoring and reporting on the project.

Covid

In March 2020, as a result of U.K. government regulations, the U.K went into national lock down as a result of the Covid-19 global pandemic. Unfortunately, this coincided with our first day on site for OBF group work at our social housing build project. After furloughing OBF delivery staff for three and a half months from May to August, one intake of groups of young people was not completed as a result of lockdown and two further planned intakes were not delivered. We had been working



towards this build with our OBF young people for quite some time, finally in September 2020 we had the opportunity to get back on site and work with young people learning new skills and contributing to the construction of six eco restorative social housing units. At that time, we were one of very few face to face group training opportunities in the region. Again, in January 2021, governmental guidance prevented us from recruiting for our Spring intake. The loss of four intakes of groups of Young People and reduced group size for the final year of the project directly resulted in the project not meeting this outcome. The impact of the pandemic affected our ability to achieve outputs for our outcomes. However, managing to deliver such high-quality buildings despite these setbacks and building with a community of hard to reach Young People, is a testament to the hard work and skill of the entire OBF management, construction and project delivery staff.

Reflections

There have been many highlights over the last five years with “Building Sustainable Communities”, many young lives impacted, many remarkable experiences had, and many innovative, sustainable buildings created for the community.

The aim we set for the project during conception, to provide remarkable opportunities for Young People to develop both themselves and their local communities and environment through sustainable construction and green skills training programmes, has been achieved with “Building Sustainable Communities”. We exceeded two of our four outcomes based around the themes established by Our Bright Future; achieving high percentages of our outputs targets for two outcomes. By focusing solely on supporting hard to reach groups of Young People to engage with this project, we knew there were going to be barriers to achieving high engagement and accreditation targets. When a global pandemic is then introduced to the formula, engaging Young People in the project became almost impossible. However, it is due to the hard work, experience and professionalism of the project delivery and management team, we were able to complete this project with the success that we have. In addition, it is through the flexibility, understanding and support of the funder that we were able to deliver this project to such a high standard during such difficult circumstances.

Working with Young People, we have constructed 11 innovative buildings that improve the local environment and community. By providing beautiful spaces sustainably constructed for community use, sustainably designed buildings that manage water, recycle and repurpose materials and produces its own energy we have shown through this project that you can deliver programmes that improve the well-being of Young People so that they can reconnect with their communities and make a positive contribution.

Analysis of monitoring data evidenced that Young People working with Down to Earth on this OBF project experienced a noteworthy reduction in anxiety and depression. Engaging with the programme over the course of 6-8 weeks, helps participants feel better about themselves, feel valued and more connected to others. Additionally, they experience a decrease in feelings such as bored, a failure or sad.

Feedback from OBF participants and Referral Agency support staff alike have been overwhelmingly positive about their engagement with the project and the lasting impact the programmes have had. Participation has inspired some of the Young People we worked with continue to improve their well-being and working towards a brighter future for themselves and for our communities. By increasing self-confidence, providing a safe and inclusive environment in which to learn and gain personal, social and vocational/practical skills, creating an atmosphere of being valued for who you are, and experiencing meaningful outdoor activity we have had the privileged opportunity to impact the lives



of some of our most vulnerable members of society, Young People from hard-to-reach groups and marginalised communities. For each member of the project team, it is about the individual participant and their story and experience with DTE. To stand side by side with Young People whilst they have life changing experiences and getting to share this with them, is the most beneficial part of our jobs and why we continually aspire to high standards for our work, our team, our projects and innovative community buildings.

Each week, this is something that I can look forward to. I would quite happily keep coming every day as long as you'd let me. -OBF participant



Figure 25: Build Me Up team finishing construction of the Eco Build programme

Figure 26: Fire as a vehicle for bringing a group together

Figure 27: OBF participants gaining cob wall building skills

All of our groups have benefitted in many different ways not only learning new skills but feeling respected and valued through the opportunity to give something a go with the expert support and encouragement from Down to Earth Facilitators. Increased confidence and self-belief have been an outcome theme throughout the programmes, many of the participants have gone on to gain employment after their time with Down to Earth, many in construction and others elsewhere, they have often had more confidence and motivation and were able to find employment.-Communities for Work Engagement and Employment Officer



Figure 28: OBF participants using Group Friendly Drawings for the Eco Build programme

