

OUR BRIGHT FUTURE EVALUATION

Environmental Leadership: a research study



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ERS Ltd and Collingwood Environmental Planning

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PREFACE

Our Bright Future

Our Bright Future is a £33m programme of 31 projects across the UK funded by the National Lottery Community Fund. 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. Ranging in scale, from local to national, projects focus on activities such as involving young people in practical environmental conservation, engaging them in vocational training, supporting them to develop their own campaigns around environmental issues and helping them to start their own sustainable enterprises. The seven year programme is managed by the Wildlife Trusts and is due to draw to a close at the end of 2022. In its first three and a half years of operation, Our Bright Future engaged over 35,000 young people (in the short- to long-term) in activities across the portfolio projects.



Programme evaluation

ERS Ltd, in partnership with Collingwood Environmental Planning (CEP), were commissioned in 2016 to undertake an evaluation of the Our Bright Future programme. The programme evaluation seeks to identify, analyse and assess: the collective impact of the 31 projects and good practice, as well as the added value of the programme's functions (i.e. cross-project learning).

The [Mid-Term Evaluation Report](#) for the programme, published in 2019, indicated that participation in the Our Bright Future projects had a variety of positive impacts for young people. However, the report also concluded that there was a lack of evidence gathered directly from young people to verify and better understand the extent of these impacts and how they were facilitated by projects. In response to this gap in evidence, three themes were selected by the Our Bright Future Evaluation Panel¹ for further in-depth evaluation studies. This included designing a study to explore the extent to which young people participating in Our Bright Future projects feel that they are able and motivated to act as environmental leaders².



¹ Reporting to the Our Bright Future Steering Group, the Evaluation Panel comprises representatives of members of the consortium and the National Lottery Community Fund. It drives forward the research and evaluation of the programme.

² A youth environmental leader is defined as “an individual... who met four criteria: a positive attitude toward the environment, positive environmental behaviour, initiative or leadership activity, and involvement in multiple spheres of action.” (Arnold, Cohen & Warner, 2009)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This study was designed to gather data directly from participants themselves and **examine to what extent, and in what ways participants feel that they are able and motivated to act as environmental leaders**. It seeks to explore activities, outputs, outcomes and impacts related in particular to Our Bright Future Programme Outcome 1: *Participation in the Our Bright Future programme has had positive impacts on young people equipping them with the skills, experience and confidence to lead environmental change*.

The study is intended to **inform the ongoing delivery of Our Bright Future projects and projects across the youth and environment sectors**. It is therefore anticipated to be relevant to practitioners, policy makers and organisations seeking to engage young people in the environment (be that practically or theoretically).

This report presents the results of three key research activities undertaken between September 2019 and October 2020. **A literature review**, to better understand current frameworks and research into youth environmental leadership and identify key topics to explore in the primary evidence collection; **focus groups with young people** who are currently or have previously participated in an Our Bright Future project (17 young people participated across three focus groups); and **semi-structured interviews with young people** (11 interviews) and project staff (six interviews).

Three Our Bright Future projects were selected for the interviews and focus groups: My World My Home (Friends of the Earth); Bright Green Future (Centre for Sustainable Energy); and the Environmental Leadership Programme (Uprising). These projects were chosen given their focus on different aspects of leadership, because they represent a range of types of area (e.g. urban and rural) and to provide a good geographical spread. Young people and project staff from a number of other projects (Grassroots Challenge, My Place, One Planet Pioneers, and Tomorrow's Natural Leaders), were also interviewed to provide additional perspectives from projects which are not specifically focussed on leadership.

Key Findings



Overall, participating young people have a broad and inclusive view of what it means to be an environmental leader. Key skills and competences that the young people feel are needed to lead environmental change included self-confidence, inclusive team working abilities, an ability to lead by example, a clear sense of self and direction, emotional competences such as resilience and accountability, and practical skills such as organisation and communication. This reflects closely the attributes of environmental leadership identified in the literature review.

“An environmental leader is anyone who is passionate about the environment and wants to make a difference and is also willing to work with others to help them do the same. To influence others and have confidence to show other people what to do”. Project participant

Based on a definition of youth environmental leadership proposed by Arnold, Cohen & Warner (2009)³, almost all young people interviewed and who participated in the focus groups for this study could be considered environmental leaders. Nearly all focus group and interview participants have either already taken environmental leadership action or planned to do so in the future.

³ A youth environmental leader is defined as “an individual between the ages of 16 and 19 years who met four criteria: a positive attitude toward the environment, positive environmental behaviour, initiative or leadership activity, and involvement in multiple spheres of action”.



Overall, the young people who participated in this study felt that the Our Bright Future programme has made them better equipped and motivated to lead environmental change. Many of the participants felt that taking part in Our Bright Future was the *most* significant factor in influencing their feelings of confidence and empowerment to lead environmental change⁴.

“The [Our Bright Future] project has been the most important influence on the way I think and act about the environment.” Project participant

Some themes emerged when asking young people *how* being involved in their Our Bright Future project has made them feel more able to lead environmental change. These themes included: feeling empowered that their voice can be heard; gaining confidence from networking with other like-minded young people as well as meeting environmental professionals and decision makers; and also by gaining knowledge of environmental issues and practical skills/experience to help them lead change.

“I can sometimes feel like I’m fighting a lost cause, but I felt empowered by being with like-minded people on the Uprising ELP.” Project participant



Many of the young people involved in this study planned to lead or take environmental action in the future. Ways that participants planned to do this included: career and educational aspirations; campaigning; continuing involvement with their Our Bright Future project or fellow project participants; becoming involved in other projects similar to Our Bright Future; or taking personal actions for positive environmental change e.g. eating less meat.

“It has helped me motivate other people to join, engage them and make them interested in the topic.” Project participant



All three case study projects reflect similar frameworks for youth empowerment and environmental leadership to those found in the literature. For example, all three projects involve young people working in groups to develop their own local campaign or social action project chosen by them (for example a campaign related to air pollution on roads outside the participants’ school), while providing the young people with support (such as mentoring) and networking opportunities.

“I’ve participated in many things I otherwise wouldn’t have been able to and have developed my campaigning skills.” Project participant

The types of activity most mentioned by young people as being particularly effective in empowering them to become environmental leaders were:

- mentoring support;
- networking opportunities with other young people and environmental organisations;
- opportunities to speak in public;
- gaining ‘real-life’ experiences and skills by working together to design and deliver campaigns or projects; and,
- having access to training and skills development.

“Support from mentors (they are amazing), not just limited to environmental issues, has made me feel confident in my own abilities.” Project participant

⁴ Based on the Our Bright Future programme outcomes.



Other factors, besides involvement in Our Bright Future, have influenced young peoples' views or confidence in leading environmental change. These influences are mostly down to individuals' personal experiences, but some themes did emerge, including: educational background (e.g. chosen A level subjects, university degree); the school strikes for climate and growing publicity/media coverage of the climate crisis; social media; friends and family; and environmental issues in their local area e.g. air pollution.

Overall conclusions

Although the sample size is small, this study provides clear evidence that Our Bright Future has had an overall positive influence on these young people and their feelings of empowerment and motivation to lead positive environmental change.

Many of the participants felt that taking part in Our Bright Future was the most significant factor in influencing these feelings, however other factors did also play a role, and these were mostly down to individuals' personal experiences. In conclusion, based on this small sample of young people, it is apparent that **Our Bright Future has achieved programme Outcome 1: Participation in the Our Bright Future programme has had positive impacts on young people equipping them with the skills, experience and confidence to lead environmental change.**

"I have realised that even though we don't have much power as individuals, by working with others we can still influence change. I didn't know it was possible for 'normal' people to do that before."
Project participant

Many of the ways in which participating young people felt more empowered to lead environmental change could be transferable to other types of leadership. However, one thing that is potentially unique to environmental leadership is the importance of knowledge they gained about environmental issues that they would not have gained without participating in Our Bright Future.

"It gave me knowledge and resources to feel more confident speaking out about environmental issues." Project participant

Certain project activities were revealed by young people as being particularly effective in empowering them to become environmental leaders and these activities and forms of support also reflect theoretical framings found in the literature of effective youth empowerment and leadership development programmes. Projects aiming to help young people take a lead on environmental issues should focus on providing these opportunities for participants going forward.