

Our Bright Future: Learning Paper 1



SKILLS AND EMPLOYABILITY: LEARNING FROM OUR BRIGHT FUTURE

ACHIEVEMENTS, WHAT WORKED, LESSONS LEARNED

Introduction

Our Bright Future was an ambitious and innovative partnership led by The Wildlife Trusts and funded by The National Lottery Community Fund, the largest funder of community activity in the UK. It was a programme of 31 projects running from 2016 to 2021 which brought together the environmental and youth sectors. Projects shared the aim of empowering young people (aged 11-24) to lead future environmental change and ranged in scale from national to local.

Project activities included: involving young people in practical environmental conservation; engaging them in vocational training and work experience; supporting them to develop their own social action campaigns around environmental issues; and helping them to start their own sustainable enterprises.

The evidence in these papers has been collected as part of the evaluation of Our Bright Future. They have been written by the evaluators, Economic Research Service Ltd (ERS) and Collingwood Environmental Planning (CEP), as a tool to share learning from the programme and to influence future provision.

This paper is based on evaluation evidence collected from Our Bright Future projects and participants between 2016 and 2020. This includes project quarterly and annual reports; interviews, focus groups, and e-surveys of participants; and project manager interviews. It focusses on:

- what was successful in supporting young people to develop skills, gain qualifications and improve their employability**, that is improving their work readiness and taking steps towards securing a job; and
- key achievements of Our Bright Future projects and programme** related to skills and employability

The aim of sharing these findings is to help future projects harness the natural environment to develop young people's skills, in turn improving their life chances and ability to make changes for the environment.

The logic model below summarises the types of skills and employability outcomes young people who took part in Our Bright Future may have gained, and the types of activities which were shown to have supported achievement of outcomes.



Project activities & opportunities

Accessible & supportive

- Flexible, long term support
- Removing barriers
- A wide range of options
- Mentoring support
- Experienced staff
- Peer support

Environmental learning

- Being outside
- Practical environmental activities

Personal development

- Support with confidence-building
- Meeting like-minded people
- Opportunities to lead
- Group activities

Job support

- Specific careers support
- Professional and peer networks
- Paid work

Outcomes

Attainment

- Tangible achievements
- Enhanced and improved CVs and interview skills
- Examples of work experience
- Formal qualifications from accredited bodies

Personal, social, emotional, and work-based skills

- Improved self-confidence

- Confidence to meet and work with new people
- Teamwork and communication
- Pride in achievements

Knowledge & skills

- Increased knowledge
- Knowledge in new areas
- Transferrable skills
- Practical and professional skills

Impacts

Short-term impacts

- Increased chances of getting jobs
- Young people are ready for work
- Raised aspirations and more hope for the future

Long-term impacts

- Young people are seeking out further opportunities for development

- Young people are applying for and securing higher/further education and training opportunities
- Young people are seeking and securing part-time, full-time and voluntary roles
- Young people are starting their own businesses

Our Bright Future's key achievements relating to skills and employability

Our Bright Future projects had differing targets related to skills and employability. Some offered formal, accredited programmes, whilst others developed skills and employability informally through a range of project activities.

Key achievements of the programme, in relation to skills and employability:

- Young people developed a wide range of skills including: practical environmental skills, work-based skills, and social and emotional skills;
- Skills development supported wider outcomes for young people such as: social benefits; improved health and wellbeing; and greater environmental awareness and appreciation.
- Young people increased their self-confidence and confidence in social and professional situations;
- Young people improved their work readiness and employability;
- Young people gained improved aspirations and hopes for the future;
- Young people achieved progressions into work or education.



Key skills outcomes for young people

Young people gained a wide range of skills, through a varied and flexible offer of activities

- Skills were developed across a range of areas, in a range of different ways. Most commonly, this included practical environmental skills, work-based skills (such as timekeeping, professional behaviour etc.), and social and emotional skills.



Young people gained a wide range of qualifications, including nationally recognised awards covering practical and social and personal, social, emotional, and work-based skills

- Qualifications gained included, for example: AQA unit awards; Level one and level two apprenticeships e.g., environmental conservation; ASDAN qualifications; Agored Cymru awards; City & Guilds awards, and John Muir Awards.
- Achieving awards enhanced young people's sense of achievement.
- Project managers stated that, without Our Bright Future, qualifications would not have been gained due to a lack of opportunities of a similar time-length and/or to such a personalised level.



Young people developed leadership skills and put these into action to work towards environmental change

The young people interviewed/surveyed shared that Our Bright Future has made them feel:

- More motivated to make a difference for the environment; and, importantly,
- More confident and better equipped (skills, knowledge, connections etc.) to act on that motivation, actively leading environmental change.



Key job and work readiness outcomes for young people Young people developed confidence, skills and knowledge and went on to secure a range of jobs and placements

- 84% of past participants surveyed stated that Our Bright Future had improved their hopes for the future.
- Just under a third of young people surveyed linked their success in securing jobs or further study to taking part in Our Bright Future.
- Experiences gained have provided young people with "something to talk about" in job interviews and applications, both when applying for opportunities within and outside of the environmental sector(s).

“ Development of skills - both practical and 'soft' - is implicit within the majority of our activities. Alongside these practical skills, young people have learned teamwork, resilience, planning, and self-management.

PROJECT MANAGER

“ It's valuable for young people to achieve an official award at the end of it. (In particular,) young people who require additional support and who work to get a certificate - they are very excited by it, and it boosts confidence and self-esteem.

PROJECT MANAGER

“ I guess before I had a mentality of power isn't for people like me and I came out with a mentality of, I can build and be part of that future if I want. There is a place for people like me in these areas. Someone with my skillset and from my background and I actually have something to give as well.

PROJECT PARTICIPANT



Young people secured jobs and work placements, self-employment, and education opportunities as a result of taking part in Our Bright Future

- Progressions into education, and benefits related to improving work readiness, getting jobs and gaining work experience, were most common for those of working age i.e., programme participants who were 16-18 and above.
- Just under a third of young people surveyed indicated that Our Bright Future had contributed to them securing a job.

Opportunities for participants across the portfolio have been varied and have included, for example:

- Internships and apprenticeships with the National Trust, National Park Authorities, Natural England, Wildlife Trusts and Groundwork in positions such as rangers and ecologists;
- Increased motivation to secure jobs in the environmental sector / greater desire to work outside in nature;
- Employment or self-employment in the environmental sector;
- Voluntary roles, jobs and self-employment in other sectors, from fashion to engineering;
- Further study in various areas, including environmental courses;
- Social action and campaigning;
- Taking on external leadership and decision-making roles.

Longer term impacts on young people's destinations have yet to be realised, with more than half of participants yet to reach working age, and many having future plans to pursue the same or similar destinations as those above.



Young people became more aware of environmental career options and were influenced to pursue environmental jobs

- Gaining knowledge of career paths available within the environment sector/(s) has been valued by young people.
- 40% of alumni surveyed stated Our Bright Future influenced them to pursue an environmental career– particularly those participating in apprenticeships/formal learning courses.
- Young people have applied the environmental values, skills and interests developed through Our Bright Future to jobs and studies as diverse as fashion and engineering.



Young people changed their future plans as a result of participating in Our Bright Future, although COVID-19 has hampered pursuit of these in a number of cases

- Young people reported that taking part in the programme had influenced their future plans and intentions.
- COVID-19 has meant that, for some young people, opportunities already secured - such as work and voluntary placements - have been postponed or fallen through.



I applied and secured an internship with the RSPB, and a year later, secured a full-time job with Natural England. I would not have had the confidence or motivation to apply for either, without the renewed energy for environmental change that I got from UpRising.

PROJECT PARTICIPANT



It has opened my eyes to the possibilities and opportunities available in sustainable / environmental sectors and has made me see that there is a place for me and my skillset

PROJECT PARTICIPANT



“ Our Bright Future has been an invaluable experience for me, giving me many qualifications as well as applied experience, which massively helped secure my future placement... the placement will give me even further insight. It's the domino effect. The initial experience is really hard to get. It's led to my placement, which should help get me in the door ”

Case study: Gethin, Our Wild Coast participant (North Wales Wildlife Trust)

Gethin had just finished his first year in environmental conservation when he heard about the Our Wild Coast traineeship. He was struggling to find opportunities to secure practical experience in the field and hoped the traineeship would offer an insight into working for the Wildlife Trust as well as boosting his employability.



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North Wales
Wildlife Trust

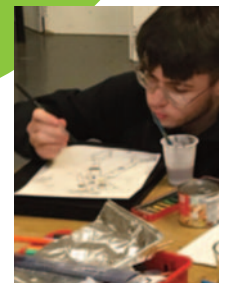
Gethin enjoyed the hands-on aspect of the traineeship and felt he learnt a lot through dialogue with the Wildlife Trust officers. He feels that the traineeship complemented the theoretical knowledge gained in his academic studies through offering practical skills and insights into marine environments. Gethin also really enjoyed learning outside and felt this encouraged him and other participants to ask questions and continue conversations about the environment in their breaks.

Through the traineeship, Gethin was able to gain a number of AQA qualifications, including a RAC certificate in Emergency First Aid at Work for Outdoor Practitioners. He notes this is ordinarily quite expensive and will benefit him in future jobs in the outdoor sector.

“I learnt a lot from my university course over my first year, however, my 2 weeks with the WT was invaluable in teaching me what my academic studies could not; a first-hand understanding of conservation practice.”

Gethin feels that the most important outcome he took away from the experience was confidence in himself and the application of the skills he'd learnt at university. Gethin has since used the skills and confidence he gained through the traineeship both in his university studies and volunteer role with the Wildlife Trust.

Gethin feels Our Wild Coast was important in giving him the confidence to apply for a work placement as an assistant ecologist. Gethin also feels it helped him secure his placement, the traineeship satisfied a lot of the desired criteria for the role (e.g., ID skills and working in outdoor environments) and helped him demonstrate his passion at the interview. He believes, without the traineeship, he would've found it more difficult to secure a placement for his university year in industry and that he wouldn't necessarily have followed a practical ecology route.



Case study: Brooke, Creative Pathways Environmental Design participant (Impact Arts)

Brooke had left school and was waiting to apply to further education when he found out about the programmes delivered by Impact Arts funded by Our Bright Future.

Brooke was feeling under pressure to start work but was anxious and didn't feel ready. The Creative Pathways therefore offered a good opportunity to build on his creative arts skills and explore green issues, while getting support with job-searching, CV-building and interview skills. While participating, Brooke got involved in designing a comic book and short film, taking a lead on costume production. Through taking part, Brooke gained self-confidence and confidence in meeting and talking to new people.

Brooke attributes these outcomes to the supportive environment created by the project, the encouragement of staff and the support from other participants. He appreciated the opportunities provided to work with other young people with similar interests so that they were able to offer mutual support.

The project also supported Brooke to put together a CV and application which helped him to secure a place at college studying fashion and textiles. Brooke hopes to continue to incorporate the project's environmental values in his future designs.

“ The first week I was too scared to talk to anybody and it was so awkward because it was quiet and I was shy. Once I settled in and the tutors pushed us to talk to people, I started to gain confidence and make new friends. ”



Being with other like-minded individuals has given me increased hope for the future of the planet, allowed me to believe in myself and completely changed my future career (for the better)!



Case Study: Rachel, BEE You participant (Blackburne House)

Rachel was involved in the BEE You project, where she had the opportunity to learn skills in beekeeping. Although Rachel had never tried beekeeping before, she now teaches beekeeping to others as a qualified tutor and is developing her own business as a full-time beekeeper.

Taking part in BEE You started with weekly classroom sessions and theory and moved on to more practical activities. This included understanding creation and care of beehives and apiaries. The project was also able to adapt to Rachel's learning style and shortened sessions in response to her preferences.

Rachel said that the opportunity to interact with like-minded people and to try out the practical elements of beekeeping were particularly important to her. Rachel was also able to remain involved with the project longer-term and had the opportunity to gain qualifications (Level 3 Education & Training and Level 3 Certificate Assessing Vocational Achievement).

Taking part in BEE You enabled Rachel to secure paid work within the project as a bee-keeping tutor. Rachel has also set-up as a Community Interest Company (CIC) and hopes to get more people involved with beekeeping.



What made a difference in supporting young people to develop their skills

Across Our Bright Future, there was no typical approach to skills development nor common “participant journey”. Rather than focusing on developing the “right” model, adapting and tailoring support to young people's needs has been central to creating positive outcomes and adding value to their experience. Many of the elements supporting skills development have also proven crucial to engaging and retaining young people as part of the programme, as set out in Learning Paper 4: What Our Bright Future learned about engaging young people in the environment.

Elements of project approaches that supported skills development were:



Flexible, bespoke provision, tailored to the needs and aspirations of the young people



A high staff to participant ratio, to provide adequate support for those with low confidence / complex needs



For some young people, a longer duration of support (e.g., open-ended provision) to enable time for outcomes to be realised



Actively removing engagement barriers e.g., through grants and removing logistical barriers (particularly for disadvantaged young people who would otherwise be unable to engage)



A wide range of options to appeal to a range of interests and baseline skill-levels



Experienced, appropriately skilled staff to enthuse, involve and support young people



Intensive support with confidence-building to enable greater skills attainment (particularly for those from disadvantaged backgrounds)



Open-ended provision in a different learning environment to aid skills attainment for (particularly for school-aged participants)

The following were helpful in supporting young people to develop environmental leadership skills:

For a more in-depth evaluation of the extent to which Our Bright Future participants feel able and motivated to act as environmental leaders, refer to our thematic study, Environmental Leadership: a research study. <https://www.ourbrightfuture.co.uk/about/our-impact>



Approaches which encourage youth voice and youth empowerment



Networking with like-minded young people and environmental professionals



Gaining knowledge of environmental issues alongside practical skills and experience



Mentoring support



Opportunities to speak in public



Opportunities for skills development and training



Gaining 'real-life' experiences and skills by working together to design and deliver campaigns or projects



Practical opportunities to input into decision-making to be able to influence meaningful change

Our Bright Future projects also successfully supported young people to develop practical environmental skills and personal, social, emotional, and work-based skills.

- Evidence from the programme shows that practical skills are best developed through practical activities in an outdoor environment.
- Approaches that best supported non-practical skills, such as confidence and interpersonal skills, were: group activities, peer support and coaching / mentoring from project staff.

Vulnerable young people particularly benefitted from interacting with young people experiencing similar issues.

Another key finding from the programme is that confidence-building is both a pre-requisite to skills development, as well as a result of skills development. This confidence further unlocks a range of outcomes, including employability, environmental leadership, and career aspirations.

- Gaining skills, knowledge, and qualifications was closely linked with increased self-worth, confidence, and self-esteem.
- Confidence is consistently the most reported outcome of participation in Our Bright Future, with most participants gaining confidence to some degree.
- These gains can be particularly meaningful for disadvantaged young people.



Because we select the most vulnerable young people it's that boost in overall confidence that helps them in multiple aspects of life. Not just the confidence to do a course in conservation, but confidence to do something else. They can aspire to do more with their lives. That confidence boost through the project gives skills.

PROJECT MANAGER



What made a difference in supporting young people to get jobs and become work-ready

Our Bright Future has provided vital opportunities and resources which have enabled young people to develop their employability and secure employment.

There are a range of known barriers to entering environmental careers, such as low pay, lack of diverse role models, high competition for roles. (Please see Chapter 6 of the Our Bright Future research review 'Support for young people to work in the environmental sector' for more information).

Motivation and aspiration alone are important but need to be accompanied by opportunities and resources to enable young people to achieve their goals.



Elements of project approaches that supported young people to get jobs and become work-ready:

 <p>Structured, accredited opportunities linked with known barriers to entering the environmental sector</p>	 <p>Supported opportunities to lead and take ownership of project activities / campaigns / social action / entrepreneurial projects</p>	 <p>Access to and support to develop professional networks, often through seminars or events</p>	 <p>Practical and professional experiences and opportunities to interact professionally with those in power</p>
 <p>Specific careers and employability support (e.g., interview practice and job search support)</p>	 <p>New experiences and challenges that build confidence and can be used in job applications and interviews</p>	 <p>Paid work within and outside of project organisations (particularly for young people under pressure to bring in household income)</p>	 <p>Activities that complement the school curriculum (particularly for young people in alternative educational provision)</p>
 <p>Opportunities to develop peer networks and meet like-minded young people</p>	 <p>Support to gain confidence and evidence of skills through formal qualifications</p>	 <p>Consistent mentoring support (particularly during the Covid-19 pandemic)</p>	 <p>Ongoing support after starting work (particularly for young people with support needs)</p>

“ And the other outcome was the importance of the mentoring relationships- especially during lockdown it seemed particularly potent that they had that consistent interaction and someone to reach out to was really important during this year.

PROJECT MANAGER

“ We recognise that older age range – university age – are desperate for opportunities and they're not getting them. [We] provided that in traineeships. Often their experience is that they are just free labour. [We] made sure that trainees we have taken on have been getting experience that is beneficial to them and how they want to build a career.

PROJECT MANAGER

Our Bright Future projects have equipped young people with a range of skills, knowledge, and environmental awareness. These skills have often supported them to take the next step in their lives, be that into further training, volunteering, or employment.



Learning points

- As a key theme across the programme, enhancing self-confidence as an initial step has been central to enabling young people to progress towards employability and skills outcomes.
- The youth-led, individually tailored and flexible approach of Our Bright Future has supported young people to attain a variety of skills which have improved their employability.
- The environmental focus has supported young people to consider and attain environmental employment and social action opportunities, as well as to apply environmental knowledge in roles outside of the sector.

These findings are particularly relevant considering the recent impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the current generation of young people, and their education and employment prospects.

Activities such as those provided by Our Bright Future offer a potentially valuable investment opportunity to tackle challenges experienced by young people.



I feel more confident in working with other people and trying new things. The scheme helped a lot with my self-esteem and I learnt a lot of valuable new skills. Being outdoors improved my sense of well-being and I am now trained to use strimmer which will look great on my CV.

TRAINEE RANGER
SCHEME PARTICIPANT



I have become more confident in myself and have learnt new things, made new friends and had lots of fun. If someone gave me the opportunity to do it again I would!

PROJECT PARTICIPANT

