

Our Bright Future: Learning Paper 2



ENGAGING YOUNG PEOPLE IN THE ENVIRONMENT:

BENEFITS FOR MENTAL HEALTH & WELLBEING

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.

The mental health benefits of the natural environment are well-known; evidence clearly suggests that being in nature has the potential to reduce stress, anxiety and depression. The evaluation of Our Bright Future has provided further evidence that being outside and learning about the natural world have benefits for young people's mental health and wellbeing.

These achievements can be celebrated, and the lessons taken forward to design activities that harness the environment to support the wellbeing of young people. Ultimately helping young people to create environmental change and live happier, healthier lives.



Our Bright Future projects have improved participants' wellbeing

In total, seven of Our Bright Future's 31 projects originally set targets for improving the health and wellbeing of their participants. Since then, many more have also observed improvements in their participants' wellbeing as a result of engaging in their projects. A survey of participants across the portfolio for the Participant Impacts Study <https://www.ourbrightfuture.co.uk/about/our-impact/> also revealed the majority felt that participants had improved their wellbeing (258 responses received).

86%



of responding participants reported that Our Bright Future had improved their mental health & wellbeing.

With 40% indicating that it had done so 'a lot'. 22% also separately indicated it had improved their ability to manage their feelings 'a lot'.

Project managers also provided evidence of improved wellbeing through quoting participants, teachers and support workers and produced case studies of individuals to demonstrate how their projects had supported improvements in the mental health of participants. Some also collected data through surveys using the Warwick-Edinburgh Wellbeing Scale. While improved wellbeing has not been an outcome of participation for all young people across all projects, it has clearly been an important one for certain cohorts and individuals.



Targeting referrals from mental health services means that we often receive referrals for young people with anxiety and depression. Converting this referral into an actual participant can be difficult as often young people will be struggling with anxieties around leaving the house and meeting people. Where we have achieved this however, we have experienced excellent results that have made a significant difference to young people's wellbeing.

PROJECT MANAGER



The existing evidence base

There is good evidence for the wellbeing benefits of interaction with the natural environment. Spending time in nature has been found to reduce stress, levels of anxiety and depression. The UK Government's 25 Year Environment Plan recognises that these benefits to health and wellbeing are often overlooked.

A lot of research to date has focussed on adults and long-term engagement with nature. However, there are indications that engagement with natural spaces in youth often leads to greater engagement in adult life, particularly for children living in urban areas. Research has also shown that children spending less time in nature may be leading to a range of behavioural problems described recently as 'nature-deficit disorder'. Projects and interventions such as forest schools offer an opportunity to address the issue.

Research has shown that volunteering, including nature conservation volunteering, can have benefits for mental health in various ways: through improving fitness, maintaining alertness, meeting others and reducing stress levels. These have been associated with improved self-esteem, self-efficacy, social connectedness and reduced isolation. However, a large proportion of research in this area has focussed on older volunteers and there is a lack of evaluation taking place across the youth sector.



This evidence suggests that various elements of Our Bright Future have the potential to support positive impacts on wellbeing for young people. This is particularly topical due to fears for young people's mental health since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and concerns around 'eco-anxiety' experienced by young people.



'Eco-anxiety' is a term now frequently used to describe extreme worry about current and future harm to the environment caused by human activity and climate change. Psychologists and social scientists have drawn increasing attention to this as a potential area for concern and have called for more research.

How have Our Bright Future projects supported participants' wellbeing?



Being in nature

In addition to the well-known wellbeing benefits of natural environment settings, outdoor project settings and activities have also been beneficial to participants' mental health for a variety of other reasons.

Visiting new and different environments

Being outside offers a relaxing environment, often away from electronics and young people's home and school lives, allowing distraction and freedom from daily stresses and anxieties and potential for physical health benefits through activity. For those with autism and others who find social situations difficult, engaging with wildlife and nature offer alternative opportunities to connect. Concentrating on a task also allows for socialising without the need for face-to-face interaction.

Getting out in the fresh air away from uni life has massively reduced stress levels.

PARTICIPANT

Tasks with clear tangible outcomes

Trying new things, gaining practical skills, working independently, and allowing young people to visibly see the positive physical difference they themselves can have as an individual can provide young people with a sense of achievement and empowerment. This also supports improvements in self-confidence, particularly for those lacking motivation, confidence or who have struggled to achieve in other areas of their lives (e.g. academically).

The outdoor learning space gives them a sense of freedom, and sense of ability, these are things they can do, and they enjoy doing. Building things, making things, working with people that they wouldn't necessarily work with, it's giving them greater opportunities rather than being confined to a classroom if they're not overly academic.

PROJECT MANAGER

Alternative learning environment

Learning in spaces and formats different to traditional educational environments appears particularly beneficial to NEET (not in education, employment or training) young people and those underachieving in school. As well as the physical environment, practical tasks, small group sizes, choice, control, empowerment, and flexibility are key. Different teaching approaches support varied learning styles and can facilitate a sense of achievement and increased self-confidence.

Been a good day for me, something new I can feel proud of.

PARTICIPANT

The reason I was brought on to the Milestones project 4-5 years ago was that I was suffering from anxiety and being out away from school in a different environment definitely [sic] helped.

PARTICIPANT



Social activities

Not all Our Bright Future projects included activities outdoors. Nevertheless even participants of some of these projects reported improvements in their mental health and wellbeing. Social activities, support and other factors are evidently also important.

Meeting like-minded people

Some young people may not know others who share their pro-environmental attitudes and values. Meeting people who share a commitment to the environment, particularly other young people, can support some to feel connected to others and feel part of a community, less isolated and give them greater confidence in their generation. Some participants reported developing a 'support network' through their project and even making friendships which have continued beyond their participation. The development of these relationships over time may partly explain why improvements to wellbeing appear most associated with longer-term engagement (as opposed to one-off engagement).



Supportive social environment

Facilitating team-based activities and encouraging freedom of expression without fear of judgement is important in supporting young people with social anxieties and overcoming fears relating to meeting new people and social situations. Making friends and speaking with others helps build self-confidence, a sense of belonging and social skills which help promote positive wellbeing in the longer term.

“ Friendly and open people as well as a slow and patient teaching method. So, I guess this program overall just helped really calm my nerves and taught me to just try whatever and see how it works out!

PARTICIPANT

“ Helped my mental health by showing me I wasn't the only person who wanted to make positive change. PARTICIPANT

“ Being with other like-minded individuals has given me increased hope for the future of the planet. PARTICIPANT

Support and other factors



Appropriate support

Having the support of peers and trained youth workers offers young people the opportunity to share their anxieties, concerns and other mental health issues and benefit from wider signposting. This is most beneficial when participants are able to build a relationship with the same staff members through regular sessions. One to one coaching with staff has been identified as most valuable initially and for those with the most severe anxieties and/or challenging behaviour.

“

Grassroots always wanted to hear about what I got up to and what I did during the week. Always checking up on me and keeping things fun. We formed a tight family. Grassroots have been so supportive of me.

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PARTICIPANT

“

It will help me for mental health and feeling more relaxed with the world, knowing that it can be fixed and can be helped.

PARTICIPANT

Tasks which help others

Making a positive difference to a local community, or environment, offers young people a sense of purpose and achievement. This might be through practical conservation, improvements to community spaces or supporting other young people through mentoring. These tasks not only empower and reinforce to young people the positive difference they can make but also provide a positive connection to others.



“

It helped to create a safe space to go to and to do something positive completing tasks and goals. Making others happy is what makes me happy.

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PARTICIPANT

Learning about environmental issues

Learning more about environmental issues, how they might be tackled and seeing the positive results of projects designed to tackle these issues provides some young people with reassurance and optimism for the future. This is particularly important for those who are fearful for their future and experience 'eco-anxiety'.

Our Learning

There are several key factors relating to project activities and various outcomes which have contributed towards improvements in participants' mental wellbeing. These are shown in the diagram below (in no particular order).



The **development of self-confidence** underpins the reason many activities have supported young people to improve their mental health and wellbeing. This was commonly linked with a sense of achievement gained through young people trying new things, gaining new skills, being empowered and trusted and realising their potential. Improvements in self-confidence, alongside reduced anxieties, have further encouraged many participants to further engage in their projects and take up opportunities outside of Our Bright Future which have led to greater self-fulfilment, life satisfaction and positive wellbeing.

“

Green Futures has given me the information and skill set to be able to help others and also better myself, I have become more confident, less anxious within groups and teams and have become so much more resilient knowing that I can do things I never thought I would have even had the opportunity to do.

PARTICIPANT

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The variety of factors which contribute towards improved wellbeing are illustrated by Myplace's approach to wellbeing, described overleaf, as well as Loren's case story of participating in St Mungo's project Putting Down Roots for Young People.



Project case study: Myplace, Lancashire Wildlife Trust

Myplace is a green wellbeing project, with the tagline “A natural way to wellbeing”, delivered by the Wildlife Trust for Lancashire, Manchester, and North Merseyside in partnership with the Lancashire and South Cumbria NHS Foundation Trust. The project receives referrals directly from the NHS, mental health services, parents who home-school, and social services amongst others. Myplace’s activities seek to help young people reconnect with nature in a participant-led way and include wildlife walks, bushcraft, foraging, fire building and cooking, species ID, gardening, practical conservation, and mindfulness sessions.

An independent evaluation of the project found that it had particular benefits for participants who start in a place of low mental wellbeing. Other beneficial factors supporting young people’s wellbeing were identified as: the project’s positive, relaxing, and non-judgemental attitude; the freedom it offered for young people to engage on their terms (choosing their own tailored plan); consistency of project staff; and being outside and connected with nature. Overall, the evaluation concluded that the Five Ways to Wellbeing are central to Myplace’s success.

The Five Ways to Wellbeing are a set of evidence-based public mental health messages aimed at improving the mental health and wellbeing of the whole population. These are:

- **Connecting with people around you** e.g. family, friends, colleagues and neighbours;
- **Giving something back** e.g. joining a community group, volunteering, doing something nice for someone;
- **Noticing more** e.g. reflecting and being aware of the world around you and what you are feeling;
- **Being active** e.g. undertaking exercise or a physical activity which suits your level of mobility and fitness;
- **Keeping up learning** e.g. trying something new, taking on a challenge or new responsibility.

Reinforcing the value of the project, an Occupational Therapy Assistant at one of the project’s partner organisations was quoted as saying:

“Myplace are very much in line with the aims and the ethos of the Occupational Therapy team here at X [anonymised], often allowing young people to express themselves in ways that they may not have thought about previously. The young people described how good they felt about learning new skills and being able to work with tools out in the open air. The garden area was a very under used area that is now used by the young people, and they have ownership of how it will develop. Young people say that this helps with their thoughts and is a valuable distraction for them.”

“Myplace gave me a space to improve my mental wellbeing, by engaging in something meaningful and enjoying outdoor spaces. Through my time with Myplace, I found my confidence increased, my anxiety decreased, and I looked forward to each session.”

PARTICIPANT

“The project emphasises connection with both nature and people, as described by a member of the team: I’d say that the environment is a massive part of this too, the natural world is a very naturally calming and mindful place to be and, in many ways, the perfect place for people who have been experiencing very low wellbeing to begin their recovery journey. Even for those who have heard of the Five Ways to Wellbeing it can be difficult for people to start engaging with them when they have low confidence and resilience and self-esteem. They will connect with all 5 ways every single time they come to Myplace, and start to experience success at doing this, and build a bank of resilience based on things that they know they have achieved.”

Case story:
Loren, age 21, London



Loren taking part in PDR YP

Putting down roots for young people (PDR YP)

When I joined PDR YP I wasn't in education or employment. I was recently discharged from a mental health acute ward and section. Despite always having a love for nature, I'd never done much gardening before. I was struggling to concentrate, often felt low and had little confidence.

“ PDR YP were the first people to believe in me properly. They saw what other people didn't spot, that actually I could achieve a lot in my life despite not having many A Levels or any chance of getting a job soon.

“ PDR YP gave me a reason to leave the house. Gave me reasons to get out of bed and to keep going. I am forever grateful, and don't think I'd be anywhere near where I am without the team at PDR YP.

Ben (PDR YP trainer) is amazing. He is so genuine, so interested in what we have to say, so positive, and he believes in us. In my crazy ideas or strange sense of humour. Ben is there for me, that's what I needed - for someone to believe in me. I started photography at PDR YP despite only owning a phone camera. I soon fell in love with it.

Photography is so relaxing, especially nature photography. I find I'm at my happiest just mindfully looking at shapes in flowers trying to take the best photo. PDR YP is amazing at fostering young people's talents. We have weekly team meetings, and Ben always encourages us to take a lead. I realised that my skills of being methodical and organised fit perfectly for minute taking. Again, Ben gave me opportunities to take minutes in more senior meetings.



Now, I am on the board for The National Lottery Community Fund. I am on an assessment panel for UK Youth, I was on the steering panel for Our Bright Future, and present workshops for YPIL Advisory Panel at The National Lottery. I run sessions for other young people on youth voice and mental health. And, have had several articles published for BeatFreekz, the National Lottery, and the magazine Children and Young People Now. I am networking with the heads of organisations like Mind, Children in Need, and Sports UK to name a few.

I have a stable job at the British Red Cross, have lived in Glasgow for 2 months, and am about to start a nursing degree apprenticeship. Not to mention the social enterprise PDR YP supported me to set up.

I have been on a journey, and the turning point was coming to PDR YP. I know, from working with funders and boards, that programmes are based on outcomes that can be discussed in meetings and reports. But some things can't be measured by a number, and PDR YP is one of them. I can't thank them enough.