

Our Bright Future: Learning Paper 4



ENGAGING YOUNG PEOPLE IN THE ENVIRONMENT:

ACHIEVEMENTS, WHAT WORKED, LESSONS LEARNED

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.

Introduction

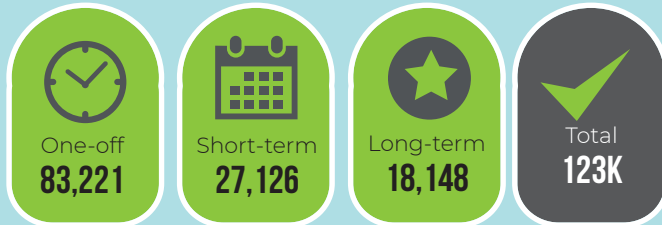
Spending time in the natural environment offers a range of well-documented benefits, explored more fully in the learning papers and the Our Bright Future final evaluation report. This learning paper presents what the Programme has learned about how to successfully interest and engage young people in natural environments: what works, for whom, and why. Where possible, good practice around engaging young people considered furthest from support is shared. Although not an explicit aim when the programme was designed, this priority evolved alongside the Programme.

The findings from this paper are drawn from evidence collected throughout the 5-year independent evaluation, primarily from those who managed, delivered and participated in Our Bright Future. We hope lessons may inform future project work in terms of recruitment and retention.



Our Bright Future participant profile

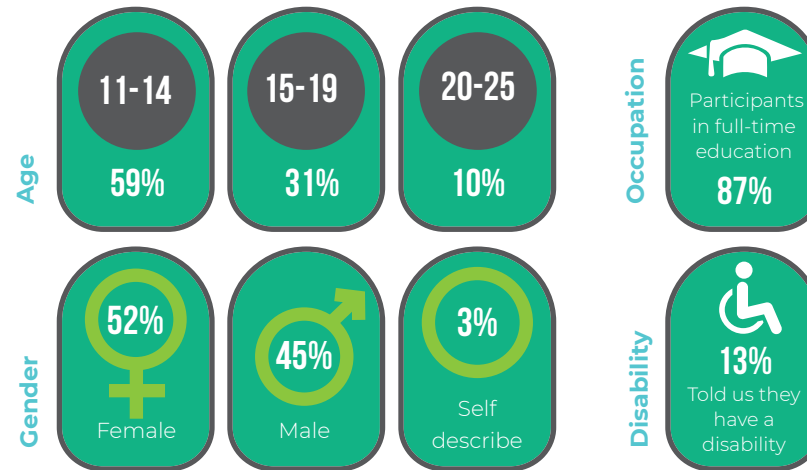
The Programme has engaged 128,495 young people, surpassing its original target to engage 60,000 young people, and exceeding targets for one-off, short-term, and long-term types of engagement. Beyond the numbers, the Programme encouraged projects to engage the right young people, in the right ways.



One emerging priority has been reaching young people furthest from support. Individual projects have had varying remits in this regard. Eleven projects (of 31) sought to engage young people with disabilities and/or special educational needs (SEND), and/or poor mental health, and around half aimed to engage young people furthest from support. Other projects recruited more broadly across the 11-24 age spectrum. Data does not suggest a difference in cost-effectiveness or progress against targets for those projects engaging young people furthest from support, though it is apparent that engaging young people with particular needs can lead to a higher cost-per-participant due to the duration and intensity of support required.

Broadly, it is recognised that there is no 'one size fits all' approach to recruiting and engaging young people across the portfolio. Since the start of the programme, project managers have worked hard to refine, innovate, and develop strategies to link their 'offer' with target participants and secure meaningful engagement.

Our Bright Future participant socio-demographics*



*These figures are collated from annual reports submitted by project managers, based on self-reporting by participants.

Asian 1%

Recruiting young people

The Our Bright Future portfolio is diverse, and there was no typical approach to recruiting participants, nor a single common 'participant engagement journey'. However, there were common lessons, as well as common challenges. Engaging young people, particularly those furthest from support, was often cited by project managers as a challenge during the early stages of the Programme. Projects refined approaches over time, developing bespoke, mixed-method solutions and learning what works. More recently in 2020 and 2021, there were challenges due to the ongoing pandemic, especially given collapses of existing or established referral routes due to furlough and closures, for example.

Common recruitment methods across the 'Our Bright Future' portfolio



Referrals
e.g. schools,
colleges,
youth services



**Events
and taster
sessions**



**Community
'gatekeepers'**



**Social
media**



**Peer-to-
peer**



**Word of
mouth**

- **Referrals were most common/effective.**

Schools, colleges, and universities provided around two-thirds of referrals.

- Events and / taster session have worked well to generate interest.
- Social media / direct advertising has worked in some cases. For under-represented groups, it has instead been important to make contact via community gatekeepers.
- Peer-to-peer / word of mouth has become more common as projects have developed.

Examples of what works well in recruiting young people furthest from support

As set out in the Mid-Term Report, (<https://www.ourbrightfuture.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Mid-Term-Evaluation-Final-Report.pdf>) project managers focussed on celebrating the engagement and achievements of those participants experiencing complex barriers. Groups engaged have been wide-ranging, including those on the autistic spectrum, those who have other SEND needs, young carers, Syrian refugees, those experiencing homelessness, and more. Project managers recognised that projects found it more challenging to engage young people with chaotic lives. In some cases, this was due to logistical or practical barriers. For example, groups experiencing barriers to engagement included: those not in education, employment, or training (NEET); older young people; those in rural areas; those with poor mental health; and those with a lack of existing interest in the environment.

Lessons shared by project managers and delivery staff in reaching those furthest from support include:

- **The offer:** Flexibility of the offer and clarity of project purpose helps engage young people and wider stakeholders.
- **Use of networks:** Internship and placement hosts actively supporting recruitment has broadened visibility of adverts.
- **Targeted recruitment:** Recruitment organisations such as Creative Access, which specialises in linking under-represented groups with opportunities, supported one project to engage individuals from a wide range of ethnic backgrounds.
- **Accessibility:** Simple / flexible sign-up and application processes reduce barriers e.g. options to submit video or audio submissions, being explicit that no prior experience is necessary and optimising for mobile rather than desktop.
- **Contacts:** Having effective partnerships or external advocates (e.g. an engaged youth worker, teacher, or an established community organisation) can both support the brokering of initial relationships and trust with young people and lead to a steady stream of referrals if this connection is maintained.
- **Advertising:** Marketing and advertisements should be well-planned and timed (i.e. not scheduled during exam season). For general recruitment, social media campaigns have been fruitful and demonstrated value for money.

"We continue to succeed in getting a wide range of applicants for our internships (...) This has been in part due to targeted social media campaigning, but also through building strong links with grassroots community organisations who are able to share our opportunities within their community." Project manager

Young people's motivations to get involved

Alongside understanding practical considerations for engagement, insights gathered via the Our Bright Future Skills Thematic Study

(<https://ourbrightfuture.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Our-Bright-Future-Skills-Study-Report-220421-Final.pdf>)

and Participant Impact Study provide insight into young people's motivations for participating

(<https://ourbrightfuture.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Our-Bright-Future-Impacts-for-Participants-Study-Final.pdf>)

in Our Bright Future, showing that a range of hooks exist to attract young people to the Programme.

Key learning: it is not always necessary/most effective to lead with an environmental offer to engage young people with the environment. In fact, sometimes it can be detrimental to introduce this too soon where this does not align with the young person's needs. Often, there is an alternative motivating factor for the young person, and so this can form the initial focus, with environmental aspects introduced later, or embedded into the broad offer by 'stealth'.

A range of motivators are understood for young people who have engaged with the Programme. The Skills Thematic Study highlighted a number of motivators, including: skills and employability; the social aspect (seemingly key for young people with complex needs especially); and an opportunity to 'get outside more' and/or do something practical. Explicitly 'environmental' motivators were less commonly expressed.

Motivators for young people engaging in outdoor/environmental skills provision



In addition to positive motivating factors, it is apparent that in some cases, it is necessary to actively eliminate barriers to enable young people to take part. Barriers likely to exclude young people from the outset have included: logistical / transport barriers; financial barriers; stringent entry criteria; and / or a lack of outdoor equipment / food.

Taken together, certain project offers appeared more appealing for certain groups of young people:

Young people from disadvantaged backgrounds often join projects with low confidence levels, compared to their peers. An offer providing intensive support around confidence-building, instilling a sense of achievement and removing financial barriers (e.g. paid training places, provision of travel fares and sustenance) has proven effective. In many cases, the financial incentive was a key deciding factor in their ability to participate / desire to take up the offer.

Provision centred on practical skills and activities was particularly appealing to many **participants with SEND needs**. It was noted that other factors should be in place to sustain engagement, such as a supportive environment and a high staff to participant ratio. The social aspect of working outdoors also appears to be a positive factor in achieving outcomes.

In general, school aged young people with complex needs and/or behavioural challenges benefitted from more flexible, open-ended provision. Project managers emphasised, for example, the importance of the non-school / non-home setting, as well as the need for choice, confidence-building and soft and/or practical skills development.

Young people of employment age appeared more likely to be motivated by a structured programme with accreditation attached. This was linked with known barriers to entering the environmental sector and securing entry-level opportunities. University students were typically motivated by a desire to gain work experience and employability.

Retention and engagement of young people in the longer-term

This page highlights good practice in ensuring longer-term engagement. Overall, the key message is that (1) provision should be led by young people's needs and preferences and (2) the flexibility of the portfolio to provide varied, bespoke offers has been a key factor in aiding retention.

Evidence shows that challenges retaining young people have been felt, to some extent, across every quarter of the Programme. Despite continued development of approaches, consistently observed barriers to retention have included the timing of activities and lower attendance in summer holidays or adverse weather. Other barriers to retaining young people have included a lack of interest in the project activities and aims, exam pressures, and competing commitments (ranging from social lives to employment or caring responsibilities), particularly in the older age group of 17 to 24-year-olds.

In addition, limited support functions in the area, mental health issues and obstructive home influences have also led to projects losing participants. In rare cases, young people have been unable to complete due to challenging behaviour putting themselves or others at risk. It is also noted that young people may "drop-out" for positive reasons, such as gaining employment or progressing into education. Most recently, in 2020 and 2021, the COVID-19 pandemic most commonly affected retention.



Meeting basic needs

Including warm clothing, food and snacks, transportation and bus fare, which young people may not always have access to from elsewhere.

Maintaining momentum

Opportunity to get involved soon after becoming interested. Consistency of sessions is important, as well as maintaining engagement during "breaks". Acting on suggestions promptly and closing feedback loops.

Progression opportunities

Providing extension or continuation opportunities for those long-term engaged to avoid outcome-plateau. Often this has involved creation of peer-mentoring roles, jobs, additional awards, or forum membership.

Intensive support

While group activities are beneficial, outcomes for those with low confidence / complex needs are best achieved through some provision of face-to-face 1:1 support and a high staff to participant ratio.

Peer-to-peer support

Young people have formed friendships and met like-minded peers, learning from, and supporting one-another. Peer groups are helpful to those experiencing similar issues e.g. alcohol or substance misuse.

Skilled & experienced staff

Project staff have needed to possess a wide range of skills and experience, spanning youth work skills, environmental skills, working with challenging behaviour and, in the pandemic, digital skills.

Consistent communication

Regular, personal (tailored) and consistent communication has been important to make young people feel supported, listened to, to air any challenges, and to be able to adapt provision according to need.

Boundaries & expectations

While nature can be "freeing", some young people benefitted from clear expectations and goals, as well as clear boundaries. Boundaries were particularly important when working in the outdoors with those showing challenging behaviours, to keep all involved safe.

Relationship & trust

A positive, supportive relationship between a project staff member and participant can lead to continued retention. This is most apparent when staff turnover is low, to allow trust to develop.

Flexibility vs. structure

The ability of the portfolio to provide varied offers and to tailor provision to young people's needs and preferences has been a key success factor. Within that, some young people benefit from a clear structure and clear, defined end point, whereas for others opened provision suits.

What worked, for whom, and why?

A recurring theme was the need to have flexibility when engaging with young people, to proactively respond to a range of needs or interests. The key value of flexing approaches and the duration and format of provision to accommodate young people furthest from support is in providing them with sufficient time and support to achieve outcomes. Often, outcomes would take longer to emerge for those with complex needs or barriers, but in some cases distance travelled would ultimately be greater, especially with regard to confidence.

While each young person is an individual, there are some common lessons around what has worked well and less well to engage young people with a range of characteristics and circumstances. Some examples are provided in the table below and overleaf. Success has been felt in particular when projects have dedicated time to understand young people's needs, motivations and interests, allowing this to guide the shape and format of provision offered.

Characteristics of young people	Examples of "what works" / methods of engagement
No prior interest in the environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Taking account of the full range of motivations participants may have for engaging with provision (skills, social, making a difference, employability, mental wellbeing etc.) allows projects to create an interesting offer for young people. • Understanding that environmental themes can be integrated with seemingly unrelated areas, e.g. use of sustainability in an English lesson or teaching English as a Second Language outdoors, can improve engagement.
Young people from deprived areas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Satisfying basic needs, such as warmth, food and shelter helps young people feel comfortable outdoors and encourages a better appreciation and relationship with the natural environment. • Removing financial or other barriers to participation (timing, duration etc.) enables attendance.
Young people with poor mental health e.g. anxiety and depression	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Providing consistent 1:1 or small group support, as well as recognition that barriers are unique to the individual, therefore support should be individualised. • Creating a safe and supportive environment, allowing participants to progress at their own pace. • Group work and peer support can build confidence and provide valuable support networks. • 'Quick wins' (e.g. practical outdoor tasks with visible results) enable individuals with low self-esteem to build confidence, experience a sense of achievement and gain skills. • Using the natural environment can lead to an array of mental health and wellbeing benefits for young people, leading to improved engagement.
Young people exhibiting challenging behaviour	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Undertaking thorough risk assessments, having highly skilled staff, providing structured activities and setting clear boundaries with young people all support positive behaviour. • Practical outdoor work can provide a safe outlet for 'risky' behaviours, particularly with male ex-offenders, e.g. training in safe use of knives, or learning bushcraft / fire lighting. • Positive relationship-building and having a single point of contact throughout involvement work to keep young people engaged. • Taster sessions can be useful to introduce new activities.



School staff can often find this (freedom in nature) challenging and feel that participants should be doing a structured activity rather than engaging in free play and exploration. We have, particularly in this wet and muddy quarter, witnessed a number of teenage boys losing their bravados and getting lost in imaginative free play. However, there is a need to set clear boundaries for this to happen safely.

PROJECT MANAGER



Characteristics of young people	Examples of “what works” / methods of engagement
Young people in rural areas, and conversely, young people in urban areas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Providing transport or choosing delivery locations with good transport links increases the likelihood of young people being able to attend. • Engaging digitally as well as proactively developing networks can expand reach to different geographies (and allow young people to interact with peers in different localities and build networks of their own). • Young people in urban environments may have engaged with nature infrequently prior to involvement. Taster sessions, the presence of known and trusted adults, as well as thorough advanced briefings, can lead to more positive initial experiences in outdoor settings.
Young people aged 18+	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offering opportunities to develop skills and/or gain work experience or qualifications works to engage young people aged 18+. • Providing development opportunities can extend outcomes, for example, roles as peer mentors. • Tackling negative community attitudes towards young people in this age bracket (e.g. through community training) can expand the opportunities and networks available to young people.
Young people who are not in employment, education, or training (NEET)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provision of paid and entry-level placements in the environment sector aids participation. • Recognising the complex barriers an individual may have to progress to training, education or employment and to have staff adequately equipped to offer meaningful support is essential for young people not in employment, education or training. • Campaigns specifically targeting NEET individuals can aid recruitment, for example, distributing flyers at local job centres and community hubs and targeted Facebook advertising. • Adjusting recruitment processes to explicitly welcome those with a lack of formal experience can make engagement more accessible for NEET young people. It is also worth projects considering flexible application formats (audio, video) and alternative interview questions.
Under-represented groups and communities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tailoring activities to participants’ unique needs, motivations, and background, as well as seeking to understand these unique characteristics in advance, aids engagement. This insight can be gained from parents/carers/school staff or through direct ‘check-ins’ with young people. • In-person outreach aids in engaging under-represented communities. Practically, this involved a longer-term process and genuine commitment to building trust with communities. • Engaging in peer-to-peer promotion promotes the recruitment of more diverse cohorts. Young people can be valuable assets in spreading the word throughout their own communities. • Ensuring that working cultures and recruitment processes within the project organisation themselves are inclusive can, in turn, aid in engaging a more diverse cohort of participants, including those who are under-represented in the environmental sector. At times, organisations with majority White staff have, understandably, struggled to engender trust that their engagement with racially diverse communities would extend beyond tokenism.
Young people with SEND needs or characteristics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Flexibility and tailoring provision – including format, duration, venue etc. - to individual is particularly important to successfully engage young people with SEND needs or characteristics. • Appropriately trained and expert staff, as well as mentoring relationships, have enabled individuals with SEND needs to achieve greater outcomes. • Practical outdoor activities, such as tool-use and horticulture, are particularly successful in engaging those with SEND needs. • Clearly defined roles between project staff and external support staff ensures safety.
Young people who benefit from alternative education provision	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Outdoor, informal activities (i.e. distinct from a traditional classroom and/or problematic home environments) work best to engage this cohort of young people. • Practical outdoor activities with ‘quick wins’ and visible results can build confidence. • Utilising the wellbeing benefits of nature enables young people to feel relaxed and calm and promotes engagement, as well as positive outcomes. • Working closely with external support staff and agencies is important to: fit delivery around existing demands of the curriculum, manage behaviours smoothly with clear accountabilities and effectively support those with chaotic lives.

“ Trying to connect to the outdoors whilst being indoors has not been easy and has required creative thinking.

PROJECT MANAGER

Engagement during COVID-19 and digital engagement routes

In 2020 and 2021, the COVID-19 pandemic posed a range of challenges to projects, from staff furlough, breaks in activity, social distancing, school and site closures and data / digital poverty. Further, key referral links and activity with schools halted. This affected the number of young people recruited and retained. Pre-pandemic, most projects were delivering face-to-face, outdoor activity and quickly had to pivot to online working. This involved upskilling staff, redrawing policies and safeguarding procedures and reimagining ways to engage young people with the outdoors, while indoors. In response, projects created brand-new resources to share with schools, redesigned training schemes, and much more besides. Project managers also recognised the acute challenges facing young people as a result of the pandemic and focused on the wellbeing and mental health benefits nature could bring to their cohorts. Projects have worked hard to maintain and (re)engage young people in difficult circumstances.

On the one hand, digital outreach has proven positive for some projects, with a number having discovered and engaged new audiences - particularly in rural areas- now that geography is less of a constraint. In some cases, this approach has worked so well in bringing a range of young people together around project goals that this will be continued in the future, perhaps using a blended approach. On the other hand,

the pandemic has reinforced the value of face-to-face engagement, with others and with nature, in enabling young people to achieve outcomes. As well, there have been some participants for whom digital engagement is not suitable. Those were also groups likely to be harder hit by the effects of the pandemic itself.

Engagement figures for 2020 compared to 2019 show a 37% decrease in the percentage of participants residing in the 20% most deprived areas. Further, there was a reduction in Black, Asian, & Minority Ethnic (BAME) and disabled participants. For the latter, this was in part due to the halting of Vision England's residential for vision impaired young people. Further, project managers highlighted other reasons for this drop in engagement. Crucially, some participants did not have access to the technology/connectivity to engage online. There were also difficulties engaging those in deprived localities due to an absence of safe public transport. In addition, disadvantaged participants with complex home environments and/or poor mental health found it more challenging to engage, often, with barriers exacerbated by the pandemic.

Other challenges included: time pressure on teachers which prevented uptake of extra-curricular activities; 'zoom fatigue' in young people engaging; and impaired communication with young people. Reportedly, the pandemic caused a 'communication gap' and affected ability to build trust and relationships between staff as well as peer bonding, impacting motivation and exacerbating challenges.

Successes and routes to addressing / minimising barriers to engagement: projects have utilised unspent budget lines to purchase data and/or equipment for young people; social media promotion; 1:1 phone calls to support participants; limiting session length; providing varied activities such as quizzes, breakout sessions etc.; activities encouraging independent time in nature; and online taster sessions. Some meetings have been more regularly and more well-attended than usual.



“ Working from home has not been possible for some due to overcrowding in the family home, (and) challenges with family members... some have experienced increased mental health challenges and one young person has devastatingly lost two family members to Covid-19. Whilst we have all tried to maintain positivity during this disconnected time, this kind of knowledge is heart-breaking & incredibly hard for the coaches to deal with.

PARTICIPANT

“ Just try stuff and see if it works. Doing nothing is not an option when we know there are so many young people out there struggling with things right now. Our Bright Future projects nationally and regionally have a very important role to play in these next 6 months in helping young people get back outdoors. It is also a key time to be involving young people in service redesign.

PROJECT MANAGER