

Our Bright Future Learning Paper 5



REFLECTIONS ON THE OUR BRIGHT FUTURE PROGRAMME APPROACH

What lessons have been learned about the Our Bright Future Programme approach?

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 Our Bright Future programme and its 31 projects have achieved many outcomes for young people and the environment (see Learning Papers 1 & 2, Final Evaluation Report). Our Bright Future's programme structure and approach was a distinguishing feature of the investment. The three core elements of the approach were: i) the **portfolio** of 31 projects working under the Our Bright Future banner, ii) a **consortium** of organisations brought together to manage & steer the programme and iii) the inclusion of central **programme functions**, namely the financial management and funder liaison, as well as the: policy function, Share Learn Improve (SLI) and the youth function (inc. Youth Forum).

The consortium of eight organisations was led by the Royal Society of Wildlife Trusts (RSWT), with wider membership reflecting the youth and the environmental focus of the programme. The portfolio of projects was created via an open application process. A Panel, including young people, then selected the portfolio of projects, representing all parts of the UK and aligned to the Our Bright Future goals. Of the 31 lead project delivery organisations, 16 were from practical environmental organisations or those with goals related to sustainable futures. Six were from the youth sector and 9 from 'other' types of organisations. Twenty-two of the 31 projects delivered in formal partnership with a total of 43 other organisations.

This paper sets out key reflections about the Our Bright Future programme approach. Evidence is taken from interviews with those directly involved, as well as drawing on other writing about programme management and partnership working.

The reflections of those involved, whilst always in the spirit of learning were, at times, contradictory highlighting that the experience of the people and organisations involved was varied. This paper therefore does not present a definitive list of recommended structures or approaches, but instead factors to consider. Overall, the aim of this paper is to share learning arising from the delivery of Our Bright Future, supporting those embarking on future programmes, perhaps of a similar structure or ethos.

Figure 1 right illustrates the discussion topics that emerged from the evidence. These topics fall under three themes: i) the delivery model, ii) behaviours, and approach, iii) wider benefits. Young people are at the core of the Our Bright Future programme therefore are also specifically considered.

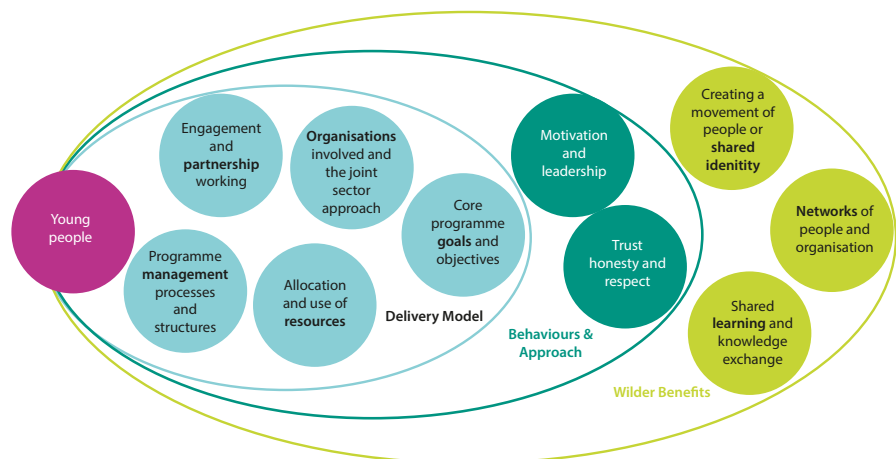


Figure 1: Themes discussed in this learning paper.

The following pages take each theme in turn and presents strengths and challenges discovered through the delivery of Our Bright Future.

¹: 'other' organisation types include those within the arts and heritage sector as well as national charities working with vulnerable adults and young people.

DELIVERY MODEL

This section discusses the strengths and challenges of the core Our Bright Future model. This includes the joint sector approach, the range of organisations involved in the Consortium and projects, the structures put in place for delivery.

STRENGTHS

A cornerstone of the Our Bright Future approach was bringing together organisations that typically worked with young people and those with environmental goals. A strength of this **joint sector approach** was the ability to learn from each other. Early on, those with experience in youth work shared their expertise about for example, managing challenging behaviour and reaching disengaged young people. Over time, the environmentally focussed organisations also shared tools such as CO2 green travel calculator. For the youth organisations involved, the green programmes have reportedly become some of their most popular schemes. Learning was typically shared via discussion topics at regional workshops, The Green Room on-line community discussion threads, as well as at webinars with presentations and Q&A sessions.

A key aspiration for the programme was to maximise opportunities for young people to be involved in the governance of the programme. The mechanisms through which the programme is seeking to involve young people, via what is referred to as the Youth Function, are illustrated right:

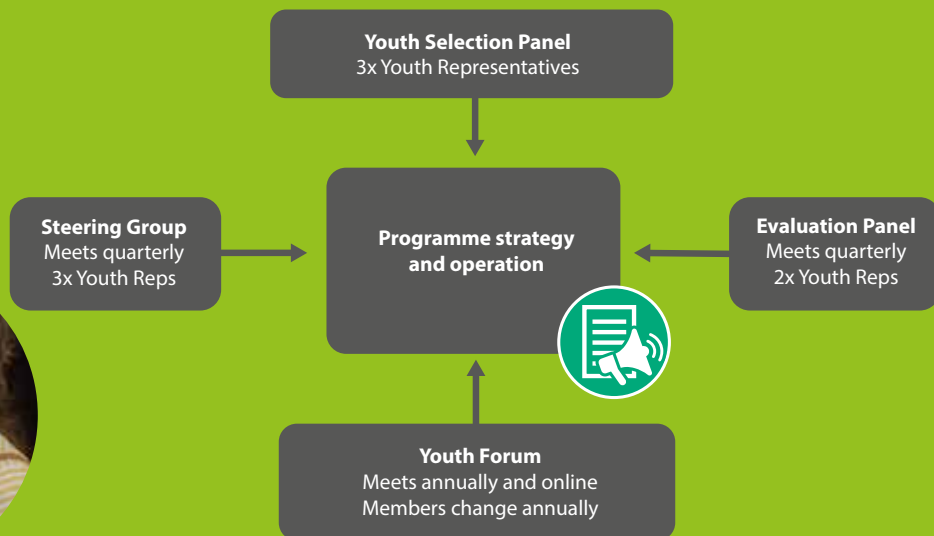


Figure 2 The Our Bright Future Youth Function

It is clear that the **youth-led approach** is integral to the Our Bright Future approach and the input of youth representatives is highly valued. However, it was not without challenges. Specifically, some felt the programme was youth-engaged rather than youth-led, and questioned whether the presence of young people at boards and groups had really impacted on programme direction. A Youth Forum member provided her own reflections:

There can be an expectation that it's all about the young people coming up with ideas, but you have to remember that young people have joined the programme because they're interested in the environment, not necessarily because they know all of the ins and outs of it. You have people working on the projects, and the environment is their whole life. It's useful if they say 'you haven't considered this factor or this challenge' because why would we? I think it's about guiding up, not in a patronising way, but I think there can be an unrealistic expectation that youth-led means the young people have to come up with everything, rather than being inspired and then having support from others to consider how that might be taken forward.

YOUTH FORUM MEMBER

An area where young people have reportedly had a significant influence is the Policy Asks and co-design of the Parliamentary event. Furthermore, a highly positive legacy of the Our Bright Future programme is the extent to which youth governance approaches have been embedded into organisations involved. See Learning Paper 6 Young People in Governance Roles.

The **variety of organisations** involved in the consortium was generally considered a strength. The model included a wide **range of skills, viewpoints, networks** that all organisations had the opportunity to harness.

The point of having a consortium is that one single organisation doesn't have all the skills, networks etc that are needed to achieve aims. A portfolio project [i.e. one that is part of a programme] should have a bigger impact.

INTERNAL STAKEHOLDER

Having the **funder embedded** within Our Bright Future consortium groups and panels was unanimously seen as a positive and efficient way to engage. Their input was considered to be constructive and reflective, and especially useful during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Successful partnerships were also forged at a project level, adding value for young people.

Overall, there has been much praise and appreciation of the flexible, straightforward, and effective grant **management from the central programme team**. The programme team has established effective processes and the integrated engagement with The National Lottery Community Fund (TNLCF) has helped the programme to be efficient and streamlined.



Our partnerships were a huge success and added great value to the project. They brought additional expertise and passion to the team. We could work closely together to achieve common goals and to collaboratively solve any issues faced.

END OF GRANT PROJECT REPORT



CHALLENGES

By adopting a Consortium model, Our Bright Future endeavoured to move away from a traditional grant-making structure. However, some organisations reported that they felt imbalances persisted throughout delivery and to such an extent that the group of organisations that comprised Our Bright Future could not be considered a true **partnership**. Specifically, there was perception that The Wildlife Trusts were **"quite dominant"** at the consortium level. For some there was an absence of mutual value and genuine two-way engagement, despite constructive conversations on the topic.



A community of young creatives, **Rising Arts Agency** has written about successful partnerships, noting that one of the key components is understanding mutual benefits: **"all parties are clear about what they want to get out of the partnership and what they can offer the partnership"**

In the case of Our Bright Future, there appears to have been inconsistent expectations about how the programme would operate, specifically in relation to the extent it would establish a partnership. The Mid-Term Evaluation report considered Our Bright Future in the context of a theoretical partnership continuum². The conclusion was that the programme co-ordinated activity rather than collaborated as a partnership. Recent feedback suggests that this has continued into the latter years of delivery.

Reflecting on project management literature more generally, the Our Bright Future programme included many components of a 'complex' programme, most notably: number of actors³, the degree of innovation/novelty and a wide range of goals⁴⁻⁵. Furthermore, complexity in **programme management** can, especially in longer programmes, lead to more process-based operations, rather than participative approaches⁶⁻⁷. The challenge to foster true partnership working faced by Our Bright Future partners is therefore not unique, particularly in longer or novel programmes.

On a more practical level, it was considered easier for larger organisations to be involved at a consortium-level (E.g. Steering Group, Evaluation Panel) as they were better able to absorb the **resource** required to travel and take the time to attend meetings.

Overall, a consistent reflection is that **defining roles and allocating resource to specific partners** brings valuable clarity. Roles can usefully reflect knowledge and expertise, as well as sharing out the weight of responsibility and crucially, set expectations. A core message is that projects did not know the extent to which they would be expected to contribute to central / programme activity. The view being that this should have been made clearer from the start and built into project budgets and plans.

A well-established component of both successful programme management and partnership working is an easily understood, memorable, shared goal⁸.

The wording of the Our Bright Future outcomes was agreed in 2017, having been refined after the portfolio had been selected to better reflect the range of activity. Each of the four outcomes <https://www.ourbrightfuture.co.uk/about/our-vision/> are multi-faceted and collectively they represent many interrelated aims. Some of those involved found it difficult to succinctly articulate what Our Bright Future was all about. The dual aim of supporting both young people and the environment to thrive was however the foundation of the Our Bright Future vision. A clear, shorter mission statement could have been beneficial.

Over the duration of the programme, some project organisations found it harder to meaningfully engage with other projects, as well as with programme-level activities. These projects reported a weaker **link between their own objectives** and the programme objectives, meaning it was difficult to find areas to collaborate on. This was most often the case for organisations not primarily youth or environmentally focussed. A strong link between organisational goals and the programme goals appears to have worked best.

Specifically, those working towards sustainability goals rather than practical environmental tasks, perhaps surprisingly, felt some distance from programme objectives. These projects have suggested an increased emphasis on sustainability, beyond nature conservation, across the portfolio would have been beneficial⁹. The suggestion was that this would have aligned better with social policy and discussion, even back at the time the programme was created. It is worth reflecting that the selection of the portfolio considered multiple factors such as location and ability to scale up and replicate existing activity. Furthermore, collaboration between the youth and environmental sectors has 'moved-on' considerably since the start of the programme, with major events and policy increasingly raising youth voice.

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I think that the 4 outcomes were quite complicated. A lot around building confidence and improving the environment but there weren't any main goals, or a good way that those outcomes linked together. Overall, I found it difficult to interpret.

INTERNAL STAKEHOLDER

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We sit outside the other projects. Our focus isn't the environmental focus most of the time. Hard to find common ground with the other projects. I expect other projects to work closely and learn from each other.

PROJECT MANAGER

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Fantastic having the funder there for support and feedback and guidance. Being really collaborative and open and honest with each other in the trickiest of years. [A] willingness for whole thing to succeed.

INTERNAL STAKEHOLDER

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Time is the main constraint on this however as the requirements of the wider movement were not specified at the time of our bid and applicants were not informed to include any OBF-wide programme engagement time/costs within their original bids. We experience a constant tension between programme-wide engagement and other priorities around project delivery.

PROJECT MANAGER

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² B O'Connell (2004) The Partnership Continuum.

³ G. Girmscheid and C. Brockmann, "The inherent complexity of large-scale engineering projects," Project Perspectives, vol. 29, pp. 22-26, 2008.

⁴ L.-A. Vidal and F. Marle, "Understanding project complexity: implications on project management," Kybernetes, vol. 37, no. 8, pp. 1094-1110, 2008.

⁶ T. B. Clift and M. B. Vandenbosch, "Project complexity and efforts to reduce product development cycle time," Journal of Business Research, vol. 45, no. 2, pp. 187-198, 1999.

⁷ "Complexity and Project Management: A General Overview", Complexity, vol. 2018, Article ID 4891286, 10 pages, 2018. <https://doi.org/10.1155/2018/4891286>.

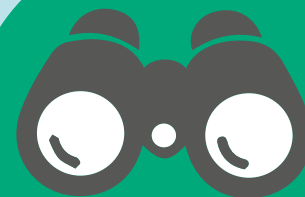
⁸ E.g. Government Functional Standard GovS 002: Project Delivery. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/project-delivery-functional-standard>.

This section reflects on the way in which people and organisations have engaged with Our Bright Future and how this affected achievements.

STRENGTHS

The day-to-day actions of the Our Bright Future programme team, most specifically openness and a willingness to listen, as well as the absence of competition between projects, despite the initial competitive processes, successfully established a culture of honesty and trust across the project portfolio.

Participating organisations often reported that their **motivation and drive to achieve** was enhanced by meeting to share ideas or challenges. Learning events and discussion therefore created benefits far greater than skills development. Ultimately projects inspired each other and created confidence to achieve. (See SLI good practice guide <https://ourbrightfuture.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Good-Practice-Guide-SLI-V2-Final.pdf>).



A VIEW FROM ELSEWHERE

NESTA notes: "Structures and processes are very important in partnerships, but culture often matters more. Strong relationships based on trust are not only critical to partnerships lasting, they save time because decisions can be made more quickly¹⁰."

CHALLENGES

There has been much praise of the efficient operation of the programme management and its functions. **Leadership** has the potential to inspire and engage teams to accomplish much more than would be expected or simply required¹¹. Within Our Bright Future, the inspiration to deliver 'over and above' was derived from peers and young people, rather via strategic leaders. Some reported that the most senior leaders within eight Consortium organisations were less visible and this type of leadership was perhaps missing. Two contributory factors appear to be at play:

- First, the programme was largely **pre-prescribed** therefore there was limited scope for leaders to actively influence or change the direction of the Programme.
- Second, the clear and stated **aim for the programme to be youth-led**. The engagement of young people in programme operations is a key success, furthermore it is hoped that this will be sustained within participating organisations into the longer term. Young people themselves fed back that whilst positive, active support and guidance is needed to bring youth empowerment to life. Youth leadership does not negate the need for management and strategic leadership and requires support and guidance to ensure success. (See also Youth Governance Learning Paper 6 <https://www.ourbrightfuture.co.uk/about/our-impact/>).

⁹ 10 of the 31 project organisations focussed on conservation, compared to 6 focussing on sustainable futures.

¹⁰ <https://www.nesta.org.uk/blog/5-ingredients-successful-partnerships/>

¹¹ Northouse, P. G. (2013), Leadership: theory and practice, 6th ed., London: Sage Publication



When any two of us go to an Share Learn Improve (SLI) event we always come away talking about stuff. Always inspires us to be more creative or do something different

PROJECT MANAGER



Guidance is always required. You can empower young people to be leaders, but you need support and guidance to get there.

YOUTH FORUM MEMBER



WIDER BENEFITS

It was hoped that the bringing together of organisations into a programme would result in outcomes 'greater than the sum of its parts'. This section reflects on the wider benefits, such as shared learning, growing networks, noting what worked well and where achievements fell short.

STRENGTHS

Feedback suggests that the programme team successfully created a **learning ethos** as well as producing learning resources and activities. Formal learning, led by the Share Learn Improve (SLI) function (Link to SLI blog

<https://www.ourbrightfuture.co.uk/2021/05/05/share-learn-improve-what-why-and-how/>), has included an annual conference, regional workshops, webinars and The Green Room on-line community. Ad hoc learning occurred when teams exchanged ideas, resources, and experiences.

Learning together has made an important contribution to a sense of being part of 'something bigger'. The **learning events** were not just about skills development but also establishing a collective identity, providing mutual support and creating the opportunity to network. Ensuring events were sufficiently frequent (online or face to face) was a key success factor, each time forging stronger

Informal knowledge exchange resulted in practical benefits for organisations, such as: adopting improved health & safety procedures e.g., safeguarding policies; sharing ideas about how to respond to the COVID 19 restrictions; and exchanging practical know-how about e.g., software solutions.

On-line engagement was effective, and invaluable during the pandemic which dominated 2020 and 2021. However, face to face interactions were better at achieving the more intangible benefits such as peer to peer emotional support, camaraderie and motivation

It is hoped the **network of people and organisations** that has been created by Our Bright Future will be a key legacy. Some participants report that they have regular conversations to learn and share, whilst others speak of plans for future bi/multi-lateral collaborative projects.

The **diversity of project activity** is frequently celebrated as it enabled bespoke provision for young people depending on their needs. This did however present a challenge when trying to create a shared identity.

Whilst not a written objective or aim, working towards shared objectives has the potential to create a sense of **being part of a movement**: a group of people and/or organisations co-ordinating efforts towards wider, societal goals. Feedback from those who did feel part of an Our Bright Future movement reported a range of positive effects such as inspiring others, feeling great pride in collective achievements and the confidence to do more. As noted in Learning Paper 1, Skills & Employability, building confidence is a crucial component of supporting young people to develop and achieve.



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It has enabled and encouraged learning to pass between the projects nationally and this has been excellent. We have learnt from the experiences of the other projects, and it has helped us to take risks and try new things because we can see other organisations have done this. The OBF ethos of sharing and learning has been so powerful.

PROJECT MANAGER

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Been wonderful to feel part of bigger movement. Achievements can be bigger than the sum of our parts. We have been able to inspire a lot of people and been able to pick others' brains on how to do things too. Hopefully built links that will last beyond the programme.

PROJECT MANAGER

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One of the joys of OBF has been the freedom to deliver locally to best suit local needs. But the issue with that is that people can entirely make up their own decision, and no collective voice and identity. Good to have freedom, I wonder whether it hasn't been as good to have so many different things going on.

PROJECT MANAGER

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The feeling of support and a movement. It gives the project officers a bigger sense of achievement. Makes you feel you're being more impactful. Somewhere else across the UK there's many more doing the same thing. Everybody trying to achieve the same goal. Can educate young people on that too. How their impact isn't just a single gorse bush being taken down but acres of gorse for the benefit of wildflowers across the UK.

PROJECT MANAGER 2020

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The **programme-wide policy work** has emerged as something the project managers in particular, felt provided a focus for joint working and a sense of being part of 'something bigger'. The policy function, alongside projects and young people co-developed three 'Policy Asks'.

Some organisations, due to their role and remit, had not previously engaged in campaigning, movement building or social action. However, supporting young people to raise their voice on topics they chose was positively regarded and the Programme has managed to **remain apolitical**. The co-production of the Policy Asks is considered to have been instrumental in creating ownership across the programme.



CHALLENGES

Whilst some speak highly of the **wider benefits** of the programme approach, this was not a universal perspective. Some described their disengagement with programme activities over time, or that they did not recognise any benefits from a shared identity:

Generally, these were the same organisations who found it harder to find common ground with others, therefore those furthest from the overall Our Bright Future goals.

Practical steps supported the creation of a **brand**, which in turn supported the sense of shared identity. The programme created guidance on the use of logos, colours etc. These practices are well-established for National Lottery funded programmes, and many projects are used to applying these principles. Generally, Our Bright Future projects successfully and accurately applied the guidance on logo use. An even greater common identity could have perhaps been achieved via consistent word or icon e.g. project titles all including the word 'Bright' or similar. This may have helped create a stronger link between project and programme branding.

Overall, the **policy function** has been crucial in creating a common goal, particularly once the policy asks had been established. For future programmes, if there is a desire to create a movement of people early joint actions have the potential to create momentum and establish a common purpose.

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We didn't fit in with other projects so well – can't learn from each other as well – delivery still quite different – led to disengagement

PROJECT MANAGER

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Felt like 31 individual projects rather than an individual single force driving forwards.

PROJECT MANAGER

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YOUNG PEOPLE

The young people are at the core of the Our Bright Future programme. It is important to understand the effectiveness of the programme approach from a young person's perspective. This section includes reflections about the impact of the programmatic approach on the outcomes for young people as well as the structures put in place to facilitate youth engagement and leadership. (See Learning Paper 6 Youth Governance).

STRENGTHS

Young people who have taken on Youth Representative roles have spoken of the opportunities the programme approach created that they would not have encountered otherwise.

Participants at a project level highlighted the value they placed on being part of a wider network

Project managers observed that, whilst young people may have been unaware that their project is part of a large programme, it was "hugely beneficial" and "exciting" for young people. This was because the programme:

- Provided new experiences, the parliamentary event and meeting MPs being a standout highlight, as well as visiting other projects.

- Provided ways to improve skills beyond those developed via project activities, such as presenting to influential people in positions of power.

- Created opportunities to meet other people with similar values and/or from different backgrounds or localities.

- Listened to and demonstrated that their opinions and passions matter, at a national level.

- Showed 'how to' engage young people in management and governance. (See Learning Paper 6 Youth Governance).

As methods to engage young people have improved and approaches refined, the desire to place **young people in the centre of structures** has got even stronger over time. For example, when communicating, the programme avoids depicting young people as recipients, instead young people are clearly visible and central to structures, both in delivery and in communications too.

“ Definitely grown exponentially in confidence. Quite unusual for someone as young as we are to be given all these papers and read them and analyse them and think of the impact they'll have. Can't think of anything else in my life where I've been given the same opportunity. Youth Representative

YOUTH REPRESENTATIVE ”



“ When any two of us go to an Share Learn Improve (SLI) event we always come away talking about stuff. Always inspires us to be more creative or do something different.

PROJECT MANAGER ”

“ I suppose the biggest thing is the opportunity. Being made to feel like our views were important and given the time to speak

YOUTH REPRESENTATIVE ”

CHALLENGES

There have been many positives associated with the young representatives sitting on programme groups, however it was noted that the young people involved tended to be of a similar type, specifically **“bright, intelligent, graduate types”** (Steering Group Member). This was raised as a concern as it is not wholly representative of Our Bright Future participants. Relatedly, inviting young people to join formal meetings, boards and panels may not be the most effective method to establish genuine engagement. However, Our Bright Future did focus on youth engagement at **“an impressive scale”** (Steering Group Member).

For some young people, particularly those with the most acute learning and engagement needs, it was not always deemed useful or relevant to place their project in the context of the Our Bright Future programme or movement.

Where opportunities exist to introduce the programme perspective, e.g., via a common action this could be introduced if appropriate. However, for some projects, providing the **space, flexibility and opportunity for all** young people to excel on their own terms was the primary objective.



I think it [Youth Forum] has been really good for the participants. they've gained a connection to the broader community. It is so positive and aspirational. They are no longer just fix routed into their specific project.

PROJECT MANAGER



When working with [our] participants it is often hard to communicate that the project they attend is a part of the wider Our Bright Future movement. The complex and vulnerable nature of some of the participants attending [our]project has resulted in the projects focus on the use of the outdoors as a therapeutic setting and focus on nature connection. Thus, introducing more in-depth information or opportunities about the wider Our Bright Future movement can sometimes be inappropriate or confusing for those involved.

PROJECT MANAGER



Final reflections

The programme:

- Provided new experiences, the parliamentary event and meeting MPs being a standout highlight, as well as visiting other projects.
- Provided ways to improve skills beyond those developed via project activities, such as presenting to influential people in positions of power.
- Created opportunities to meet other people with similar values and/or from different backgrounds or localities.
- Listened to and demonstrated that their opinions and passions matter, at a national level.
- Showed 'how to' engage young people in management and governance. (See Learning Paper 6 Youth Governance).
- As methods to engage young people have improved and approaches refined, the desire to place **young people in the centre of structures** has got even stronger over time. For example, when communicating, the programme avoids depicting young people as recipients, instead young people are clearly visible and central to structures, both in delivery and in communications too.

31 projects and project organisations: <https://www.ourbrightfuture.co.uk/projects/>

Consortium: eight partner organisations led by The Wildlife Trusts, the National Youth Agency, Centre for Sustainable Energy, The Conservation Volunteers, Field Studies Council, Yorkshire Dales Millennium Trust, Friends of the Earth and UpRising. Founding partner, The Plunkett Foundation withdrew from the consortium in 2017 as a result of an organisational review and vInspired went into liquidation in 2018. Friends of the Earth joined the consortium in 2018.

Youth Function: provides support for youth involvement. It has been coordinated by NYA since 2019, having been previously managed by vInspired.

The Youth Forum: the main part of the Youth Function, bringing together representatives from across the portfolio to meet annually in person, as well as maintain regular contact throughout the year using an online forum. Membership of the Forum changed every year. The Forum provided project participants with opportunities to meet other like minded young people from across the UK and to discuss ideas and steer the direction of the programme.

The Green Room: A secure login website for the Our Bright Future community, providing resources, information, key dates and hosting conversations.

Policy Asks: The changes in policy sought via Our Bright Future advocacy and campaigning activities. The three policy asks definition were co-produced by the programme, projects and young people, and launched in 2019. The three asks are:

- **Ask 1:** more time spent learning in and about nature
- **Ask 2:** support to get into environmental jobs
- **Ask 3:** policy makers, employers, businesses, schools and charities to pay more attention to the needs of young people and the environment.

Share Learn Improve or SLI: A works stream that engages with projects to identify areas of learning need, provides support and facilitates knowledge sharing across the programme.

