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OUR BRIGHT FUTURE EVALUATION

Key impacts for participants:
employability, social action & well-being

ERS Ltd and Collingwood Environmental Planning

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PREFACE

Our Bright Future

Our Bright Future is a £33m programme of 31 projects across the UK funded by the National Lottery Community Fund. Projects are being delivered by organisations across the environmental and youth sectors, united by the common aim of empowering young people (aged 11-24) to lead future environmental change. Ranging in scale, from local to national, projects focus on activities such as involving young people in practical environmental conservation, engaging them in vocational training, supporting them to develop their own campaigns around environmental issues and helping them to start their own sustainable enterprises. The seven year programme is managed by the Wildlife Trusts and is due to draw to a close at the end of 2022. In its first three and a half years of operation, Our Bright Future engaged over 35,000 young people in short- to long-term activities across the portfolio projects.



Programme evaluation

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

The [Mid-Term Evaluation Report](#) for the programme, published in 2019, indicated that participation in the Our Bright Future projects had a variety of positive impacts for young people. However, the report also concluded that there was a lack of evidence gathered directly from young people to verify and better understand the extent of these impacts and how they were facilitated by projects. In response to this gap in evidence, three themes were selected by the Our Bright Future Evaluation Panel¹ for further in-depth evaluation studies. This included a study of participants designed to examine key impacts of the programme for young people. The specific focus was on impacts of Our Bright Future on young people's employability, relationship with social action and mental health and well-being.



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

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This study examined **how Our Bright Future has directly affected young people's lives**. Specifically, the research sought to evidence the strength of the link between participation in Our Bright Future and employability, employment, participation in social action, improved well-being and self-confidence. Analysis of this evidence confirms that these are prominent impacts and also provides indications of key factors and activities which have contributed towards them.

The study was intended to **inform the ongoing delivery of Our Bright Future projects** and organisations across the youth and environment sectors. It is therefore anticipated to be relevant to practitioners, policy makers and organisations seeking to engage young people in the environment, be that in practical or theory-based activities.

Informed by a literature review, **an online survey** was developed to gather responses from participants (and ex participants). Responses were received from participants of 25 (of the 31) portfolio projects totalling a final sample of 258 respondents (after data cleansing). This was followed by qualitative **telephone interviews with 12 survey respondents** which contributed to the qualitative data gathered through the survey.

The evidence for this study therefore relates to a small sample of participants, likely to be those most engaged in their projects and with a substantial bias towards those currently or recently engaging. This should be borne in mind when considering the extent of impacts evidenced across the sample. Key findings are summarised below with the full report providing an indication of the extent that these impacts were observed across the sample.

Key findings



Our Bright Future has enhanced participants' employability, increased their aspirations and broadened their awareness of employment opportunities. The study confirmed that Our Bright Future participants have experienced many of the education and employment-related benefits suggested by previous studies on engagement of young people in volunteering and environmental programmes. Participants have been influenced to pursue careers in the environment sector as well as to apply environmental values, skills and interests developed through Our Bright Future to jobs and studies as diverse as fashion and engineering.

"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

"I also cannot express my gratitude for the ethos I have acquired to the work I approach because of the time I spent there. I now work with passion which I struggled to previously find and take pride knowing that I am bettering the environment and the world we all share whilst I work." Project participant

"My involvement in the project has opened my eyes to the importance of taking every opportunity you can and running with it." Project participant

Key activities and experiences contributing towards employability and enhanced aspirations:

- Development of transferable, social skills and confidence
- Development of subject-specific knowledge and awareness of career opportunities
- Specific experiences in different contexts e.g. practical conservation and professional situations
- Opportunities to lead and take ownership
- Employment support
- Development of professional networks and opportunities to connect with others



Our Bright Future has contributed to participants' success in securing employment, self-employment and education opportunities. Participants have gained internships, apprenticeships and employment with the National Trust, National Park Authorities, Natural England, Wildlife Trusts and Groundwork in positions such as rangers and ecologists.

"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 Our Bright Future]." Project participant

"[Our Bright Future] gave me the confidence and support to make my social enterprise a reality and escape 9-5 office life to work for a cause and create positive change in my community." Project participant

There are indications that longer term impacts on participants' education and employment destinations have yet to be realised with the majority of participants reporting that the programme influenced their aspirations, hopes and plans for the future relating to their education and career.



Our Bright Future has influenced some participants to continue or start volunteering either for organisations involved in the programme or other social and environmentally focussed causes. This was partly as a result of increased appreciation of the personal benefits of volunteering and partly due to altruistic motivations. Projects have also given participants confidence to take on voluntary positions on governance and management boards and other roles which they had not previously considered open to them. This included roles on the Young Friends of the Earth England steering group, a local Wildlife Trust youth forum, a Friends of Park group, a school governing board and roles planning various environmental and community activity days.

"It has influenced me to share my opinions on youth engagement with the environment and to do this I have volunteered on a number of boards to help steer the organisations." Project participant



Our Bright Future has influenced participants to engage in further social action and campaigning to influence decisions. In some cases, this was as a result of projects changing participants' attitudes towards campaigning. Participants tended to engage in campaigning at a local rather than a national level and generally focussed around environmental issues including climate change, single use plastics, and wider waste issues. Many had joined existing groups and campaigns while some described producing online content to campaign, using film, photography, social media and online content to share messages. Examples of tangible outcomes arising from these campaigns largely focussed around schools and included establishment of several eco clubs, creation of wildlife gardens and schemes to reduce waste and increase recycling.

"I managed to make a speech in front of people. I definitely wouldn't have been able to do that without my time on the project, it gave me the boost I needed. I had the confidence to stand at the front line and shout down the megaphone words of encouragement for all the people of the streets to hear." Project participant

"Made me feel so much more confident and passionate about pursuing change. It's definitely set me up well as a lifelong activist!" Project participant



Our Bright Future has provided participants with inspiration and confidence to voice their opinion and continue to want to engage with environmental issues. While evidently an impact for participants of all activity types, an increased sense of empowerment was most widely apparent in participants of campaigning and entrepreneurial project activities. Importantly the expectation to continue to engage in social action appears to be sustained for more than 6 months after participation.



Our Bright Future has helped to improve participants' well-being through providing experiences outdoors, in the environment and opportunities for social engagement. Improved well-being was most commonly reported by participants of outdoor practical environmental tasks and apprenticeships or formal learning courses. The latter was found to be particularly important for those who felt isolated or who had experienced poor mental health prior to their participation.

"[Our Bright Future] gave me a space to improve my mental wellbeing, by engaging in something meaningful and enjoying outdoor spaces... I found my confidence increased, my anxiety decreased and I looked forward to each session." Project participant

Interestingly, instead of experiencing 'eco-anxiety'², as discussed in wider literature, learning more about environmental issues and meeting other young people through Our Bright Future projects has served to give participants confidence in their generation and the potential to tackle environmental problems. This has, to a degree, addressed participants' fears, improved their optimism for the future and their reported well-being.



Our Bright Future has developed participants' self-confidence. This appears to be most associated with longer-term engagement (participation for three months or more) in the programme. This outcome was found to be facilitated by the supportive environment provided by projects; social interaction; new experiences and challenges; the development of skills and achieving things. According to respondents, many would not have gained this confidence and other social and emotional competencies without Our Bright Future.

Through Our Bright Future participants have also gained confidence to engage with others socially, speak in public, apply skills and take on new opportunities. Increased confidence is not only a common outcome but has also evidently underpinned various impacts for participants including increased employability and take up of various opportunities, raised ambitions and improved well-being.

Overall conclusions

There is no common pathway through Our Bright Future and the 31 different projects vary extensively. However, this study has provided evidence to confirm that **engagement in activities provided by Our Bright Future have valuable education and employment-related benefits for young people** alongside supporting improvements in self-confidence and well-being. As a preface to the report, these confirmed impacts, and the activities which were found to be key in achieving them, are presented in the diagram overleaf. These will be valuable for future interventions to consider.

Based on the evidence collected, **enhancing self-confidence should be considered a central aim of any intervention** since this was found to underpin further positive impacts for young people including progression into education, training, volunteering and employment, as well as improvements to mental health and well-being. Improved self-confidence evidently provides the foundation for personal growth. As such, **key components for incorporation in future interventions include a supportive environment, social interaction, new experiences and challenges, the development of skills and achievements.** Long-term engagement also appears to be more beneficial for self-confidence and well-being benefits than short-term engagement.

These findings are **particularly pertinent considering the recent impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic** on the current generation of young people, their education, mental health and employment prospects. Activities such as those provided by Our Bright Future appear to offer a potentially valuable investment opportunity to tackle multiple agendas and challenges relating to young people.

² Extreme worry about current and future harm to the environment caused by human activity and climate change.
<https://friendsoftheearth.uk/climate/how-cope-eco-anxiety>

Logic model map of outcomes and impacts for participants

