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OUR BRIGHT FUTURE EVALUATION

Young people's skills development in
Our Bright Future projects

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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 exploring young people's **skills development** as a result of participation in the Our Bright Future programme, as well as the approaches taken by specific projects towards fostering and developing participants' skills.



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 sought to explore **young people's development of skills** across the Our Bright Future portfolio. Broadly, the study aimed to generate insight into **which skills participants gained** as well as *how* these skills gains were achieved.

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.

This research was carried out across 2020, with the primary research undertaken between May and September 2020. Study findings are drawn from: a literature and evidence review; in-depth **telephone interviews** with a sample of ten project managers; a review of **supporting evidence** collated by the same projects; and, relevant **e-survey data** from the Our Bright Future alumni survey (administered as part of a parallel thematic study). Site visits were initially proposed, however, as the primary research phase coincided with COVID-19 restrictions, remote research methods were employed.

The study is intended as a **deep dive into the approaches** to skills development undertaken by a selection of Our Bright Future projects, purposively sampled to reflect the diversity of approaches to, and outcomes of, skills development across the portfolio.

Key findings



A wide array of skills and qualifications have been gained by participants

The study confirmed that Our Bright Future participants have developed an impressive array of skills, across a range of domains, in a range of different ways. The types of capabilities developed include **practical environmental** and environmental science skills, **work-based competencies**, as well as softer **social and emotional skills**. The learning methods also vary and sometimes combine informal engagement with structured, accredited traineeships or programmes.

The **variety** of skills developed and learning methods used highlights the diversity of Our Bright Future projects. Furthermore, the diversity *within* projects reflects the **flexibility** of the offer to young people.

In terms of the *scale* of outcomes, feedback from project managers suggests that between 75 % and all young people who completed a programme of activity have developed skills.

“Development of skills (both practical and ‘soft’) is implicit within the majority of our activities. Alongside these practical skills, young people have learned teamwork, resilience, planning, and self-management.” - Project manager consultee

Project managers highlighted that **interpersonal and social skills** are developed by participants to some extent across all activity types. Factors contributing positively to the *prevalence* and *effectiveness* of skills development of this type included: frequent use of **group activities**; and, a greater **depth of engagement** (either longer duration or intensive engagement).

It was noted that a focus on these types of skills can prove **particularly impactful** for individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds, those with complex needs, and/or those with a characteristic which may affect their ability to engage socially. Evidence seems to suggest that the non-classroom setting contributes to positive outcomes.

Participants have gained a wide **range of qualifications**, including accredited (both externally and internally), non-accredited, bespoke awards, and nationally recognised awards, covering practical and soft skills. Although a range of approaches are taken, a common outcome seems to be the reported **sense of achievement** young people felt in gaining an award.

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

Project managers reported that equivalent opportunities of **equal duration** and such a **bespoke level**, would not have been available without Our Bright Future.



A range of approaches / models / settings for delivering skills have proven effective

Projects show a wide range of approaches to skills delivery and participants have been offered a wide range of options for engaging with project provision. Across Our Bright Future there is **no typical approach** to skills development or common “participant engagement journey”.

The pure variety of provision underlines that there is no single best route to building skills; rather, a range of approaches are effective in developing skills of various types, with various groups of young people, in various settings. Rather than developing the “right” model, success is contingent on **adapting and tailoring provision to participants’ needs**.

“The approach to developing skills (is) tailored to the skill set of the group, their learning needs, and what level they are currently at.” –Project manager consultee

The approach to skills development that is adopted is clearly **linked to engagement**, with young people possessing a **range of motivations** for engaging in Our Bright Future projects. Sometimes engagement can be driven via skills development opportunities and the clear end-goal of an accreditation; however, sometimes, skills are an incidental (albeit intentional) aspect whilst the focus is on, for example, outdoor and/or social activities.

Young people from disadvantaged backgrounds often join projects with low confidence levels, affecting their attainment of skills. Intensive support around confidence-building, instilling a sense of achievement, and removing financial barriers (e.g., paid training places) were considered effective.

Vulnerable young people experiencing similar issues to one another can benefit from being in an appropriate peer group. This reportedly aided skills development as they felt more comfortable.

A range of groups particularly benefitted “hugely” from practical activities and conservation work, including young people with **special educational needs (SEN)**.

In general, **school aged young people with complex needs** benefit from more flexible, open-ended provision. Project managers emphasised, for example, the importance of the non-school 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.

Other factors supporting skills outcomes included: the “non-classroom” setting; **consistent support or coaching** from project staff / a mentor; staff competency in creating a supportive environment; and, high staff to participant ratios. In particular, the **role of project staff** (and the multiple specialisms they were often required to possess to effectively deliver outcomes) should not be underestimated.



A range of outcomes were achieved by young people as a result of skills development

The most reported outcome was **gains in confidence**. This appears to begin *alongside* skills development, and not only as a *result* of the new skills themselves. In terms of scale, most participants engaging appear to gain confidence to some degree.

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

Employment progressions are not a central aim of all participating projects, and therefore not consistently tracked. The scale, proportion, and extent to which this outcome has been achieved has varied significantly by project. It is similarly difficult to precisely quantify **progression into further study**. However, there are numerous examples of progression to further study, and many within environmentally focussed or environmentally adjacent subjects, such as farming, animal care, or conservation.

Whilst progression to employment metrics are problematic, Our Bright Future’s contribution to young people’s **employability** is much clearer. “Employability” covers the attributes that support work-readiness, for example: being organised, having *evidence* of a capability and *experience* in the practical application of knowledge. Whilst the wider literature review revealed the contribution of programmes to employability is typically difficult to evidence, Our Bright Future projects were able to provide compelling testimony from parents, caregivers and teachers about their value in this domain.

Other, **wider outcomes** resulting from skills development included: improved **aspirations and self-esteem**; **social benefits**; improved **health and wellbeing**; **application of skills** in a range of different settings (including work and education); and, greater **environmental awareness** and appreciation.

The core success factors for delivery of skills development and outcomes for young people included:

- having experienced staff to enthuse, involve, and support young people;
- a high staff to participant ratio;
- project exchanges which broaden skills opportunities (relevant in some cases);
- a longer duration of support;
- flexibility in responding to participant needs and preferences; and,
- approaches which remove barriers to participation.



A range of benefits to outdoor learning were explored

The majority of projects involved in this study considered the delivery of outdoor activity as core to their work. One project *also* offered classroom-based elements, whilst another primarily engaged school pupils in classroom-based activity.

Outdoor delivery was clearly a preferred vehicle for projects to deliver skills, and crucial for the **practical application** of many skills. In addition, some limitations and barriers were also noted, such as practicalities and weather, and the preferences of participants.

Many **practical environmental and conservation skills** developed via Our Bright Future are dependent on a participatory “learn by doing” approach and therefore, require implementation outside the classroom-setting. There is evidence of **softer skills** being learnt alongside practical skills; however, it is less clear whether this is due to the outdoor environment or other factors, such as the group work format. The inclusion of practical tasks does however provide participant motivation, self-esteem, and a sense of achievement from the immediate, visible progress e.g., from strimming a patch of land.

“You trim an orchard and at the end of it you see a trimmed orchard. There is a clear result between effort and result.” – Project manager consultee

“The ones doing growing projects – it’s hands down the biggest thing they comment on. It’s the biggest most valuable thing they walk away with; doing something physical and developing, slowly seeing the fruits of your labour. Nothing compares.” – Project manager consultee

Wider outcomes reported include **mental health benefits** from being outside. For example, young people having stated that they feel “refreshed” and “calm”. Furthermore, there is evidence of well-being and behavioural benefits; for example, experiencing meltdowns less frequently or receiving fewer detentions. On the flip side, for some young people, the natural environment is unfamiliar and uncomfortable. For others, the perceived lack of limitations or rules can cause behavioural issues.

Overall, there were differing views on whether improved skills attainment was a *direct result* of the outdoor setting, or simply the **non-classroom, non-home** environment. Regardless, the distinctly *different* and *safe* environment appears beneficial.

Alongside skills, other wider outcomes of engaging with nature / in outdoor settings included: a greater appreciation for nature; enjoying nature more and having skills and confidence to go outdoors; an increased desire to engage with nature more often; valuable new experiences; and, improved skills of teachers and educators involved in sessions.

Overall conclusions

“In 2 and a 1/2 years, he’s managed to get from no qualifications to being employed in the job of his dreams. Thank you for taking the time and trouble to point us in the right direction and all the advice you’ve been generous enough to give. I’m not sure we’d have got this far without it. His life and expectations have been transformed into something so positive, at a time when he really thought he would never ever get a job.” Supporting evidence, testimony from the parent of a participant.

Our Bright Future projects have equipped young people with a whole range of skills, knowledge and behaviours. These skills have often supported them to take the next step in their lives, be that into further training, volunteering, or employment. The vast range of skills developed, the differing accreditation and assessment methods, and diverse delivery approaches mean that it is very difficult to make generalisations about what is most / less effective across the programme. However, skilled project staff, working with young people in high staff to participant ratios, and the different learning environment/(s) are reported to be core to skills attainment, improved well-being, and personal growth for participants.

The multi-faceted nature of the competencies improved, including social, emotional and personal skills; practical skills; professional/work-place skills; as well as environmental knowledge and awareness; means that the achievements of each young person are somewhat unique and best considered holistically. Whilst it is difficult to be precise in terms of scale, there are numerous impactful stories about young people’s journeys with Our Bright Future. Importantly, the testimony provided by parents, caregivers, and teachers highlighted that young people would not have been able to access these experiences in the absence of the programme.

“I really do believe that the >project< has been a life changing experience for >the participant<. I feel that the things he has learnt and experienced will remain with him right into adulthood.” Supporting evidence, testimony from a parent