

Growing Confidence Final Report

September 2021

Impact Consultancy & Research



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Cover photo – Students enjoying the university placement scheme



Easter bunnies made to generate a return for the youth project at Fordhall Farm

1 Introduction

This is the final evaluation report of the Growing Confidence project. This report evaluates the project's successes in meeting its stated outcomes and outputs, highlights the key lessons from the project and illustrates through case studies the impact the project has had on some of its participants.

2 Background to Growing Confidence

Growing Confidence was a £898,190 five-year project funded through the National Lottery Community Fund's Our Bright Future programme. The project began in January 2016 and was due to end in December 2020 however because of the COVID-19 pandemic it secured an extension to July 2021. The project's overarching aim was to grow the confidence of young people aged 11-24 to engage with their local environment, progressing their knowledge and skills to a level that meets their aspirations and abilities.

The project was managed by Shropshire Wildlife Trust and originally had four partner organisations each of whom brought an area of specialism to the project:

Shropshire Wildlife Trust (SWT) focused on youngsters aged 11+ for John Muir Awards, plus expanding some of the work Fordhall had been doing with children at risk of exclusion and offering weekend activities for young people. This included the following activities:

Make my Weekends Wild – monthly practical conservation days providing 11-24's volunteering opportunities to learn conservation skills, whilst discovering more about the wildlife and habitats of Shropshire.

Question Time (On-line) – a series of monthly online events focused on hot environmental topics, with talks from experts followed by an opportunity for questions and debating.

Youth for the Wild – a forum organised by young people for young people, aimed at encouraging 11-24's to be more aware of the environment. Monthly sessions included social events, talks, training, careers advice and campaigning activity.

Wild Roots – an environmentally focused youth group.

Alternative curriculum – engaging young people at risk of exclusion in practical environmental activity.

University Summer placements – 8 university students undertook a summer placement with SWT.

Work experience – providing work experience opportunities for Year 10 students.

Traineeships – SWT offered 4 traineeships (Reserves, Botanical, Hedgehog, Badger).

Holiday activity – ad hoc activity during school holidays such as trips and taster days.

John Muir Award (JMA) scheme – the project offered JMA introductory sessions and supported people to achieve their full awards.

Careers Fairs and career advice – the project provided information, advice and guidance to young people interested in pursuing a career in the environmental sector.

Fordhall Community Land Initiative delivered alternative curriculum activity at their Community Farm. They worked intensively with very small groups (2:1) of young people who struggled to engage in conventional education settings. Through agricultural and conservation activities young people were helped to develop their skills, confidence and self-esteem to help them to prepare for life post GCSE's. Support in their career progression was also provided through the provision of AQA Certifications in a range of areas and supporting participants into apprenticeships or work placements.

Field Studies Council (FSC) delivered specialist environmental training courses (day and residential) for young people on subjects such as species identification and habitat management. It also offered work experience and volunteering opportunities.

The Plunkett Foundation was originally going to deliver support to help young people set up environmentally-focused social enterprises. In year 2 of the project the Plunkett Foundation decided to withdraw from the project due to capacity issues. This aspect of the project was subsequently reviewed and refocused on support for students/graduates/post-graduates who were interested in pursuing a career in the environmental sector. This new element of the project was primarily delivered by SWT.



Planting the wildlife garden in the Preston Montford Exploratorium

3. Aims, objectives and outcomes of Growing Confidence

The overarching aim of the Growing Confidence project was to grow the confidence of young people aged 11-24 to engage with their local environment and to give them skills and experience to help them find employment in the conservation sector. The programme hoped to achieve this through providing a wide range of environmentally based activities that catered for young people from a range of backgrounds with varying levels of interest, knowledge and experience of the natural world.

The project had four primary outcomes under which sat several key performance indicators. The table below highlights the targets and the actuals achieved.

Please note the figures in brackets are the original targets that were amended or removed, in agreement with the funder, at the interim stage to reflect changes within the programme and the success of the programme.

Outcome 1. Young people will feel more connected to the local environment and be more environmentally aware.

By the end of the programme will have engaged with over (1000) 5000 young people. All will be more environmentally aware; some will have enhanced knowledge, some better skills and some enhanced self-esteem measured via our evaluation.

Achieved: 6081

Outcome 2. Young people will know how to take practical action which will have a positive impact on the environment.

By the end of the programme (250) 500 young people will have engaged in practical conservation of the natural environment on sites local to them.

Achieved: 1302

Outcome 3. Young people will have gained skills, knowledge and confidence which increases their employment opportunities.

KPI's

3a. By the end of the programme we will have engaged with over 1000 young people. All will be more environmentally aware; some will have enhanced knowledge, some better skills and some enhanced self-esteem measured via our evaluation.

3b. By the end of the programme 20 participants will have moved into employment. (Target was removed as the project refocused on career advice & development opportunities)

3c. By the end of the programme 10 participants will have received support to start a business. (Target was removed as the project refocused on career advice & development opportunities)

3d. By the end of the programme 300 young people will have received tutored training on a range of environmental issues and opportunities.

3a Achieved: 5590

3d Achieved: 711

Outcome 4. Partner organisations feel better skilled and informed about working with young people.

KPI By the end of the programme (4) 3 partner organisations will be better skilled and informed in working with young people of all abilities.

Achieved: 3

Underpinning the outcomes and KPI's are a range of outputs that reflect the range of activities and target audiences for the programme. Below is a list of the outputs and the numbers achieved through the programme.

- 1 Offering training places to 100 young people under threat of exclusion from school - 87 achieved.
- 2 Offering John Muir introductory sessions to 1000 young people – 1057 achieved
- 3 Offering full John Muir Awards to 160 young people – 180 achieved
- 4 Offering opportunities to 10 teachers to work alongside programme staff and/or attend targeted training courses to learn how to integrate the environment into the curriculum and in after school clubs. 37 achieved. 4 upskilled in outdoor education during Alternative curriculum sessions. 15 teachers on training for basic bush craft and fire skills. Shrewsbury School year 9 & 10 Teachers attending annual conservation week would shadow and learn basic skills that they then used back at school (18 over 5 years).
- 5 Running 35 day courses and 15 residential courses to study aspects of the environment in greater depth – 51 day courses and 29 residentials delivered.
- 6 Offering 30 young people volunteering work placements of a minimum of 5 days duration with either Shropshire Wildlife Trust, Fordhall Farm or FSC to experience the range of job opportunities in the environmental sector – 94 achieved.



Learning how to identify trees in Winter at Preston Montford

4. Growing Confidence Delivery and Management

The project was managed by SWT and during the early phase had a Steering Group made up of the delivery partners. As the project became more embedded and developed more defined work streams the Steering Group evolved into a delivery partnership which met quarterly.

Initially SWT employed 1 FTE Project Officer and a part time Project Coordinator. This was reviewed when the project coordinator moved to another job . A decision was made to replace the Project Coordinator post with an additional part time Project Officer and to provide some administrative time at management level. Fordhall Farm employed the equivalent of a FTE Youth Worker and FSC employed a part time (0.4FTE) Project Officer who focused on project management with on the ground activity being delivered by FSC education staff and other experts.

Throughout the project there were several changes in relation to delivery partners and staff that have impacted the programmes delivery and its activities. The withdrawal of the Plunkett Foundation resulted in a review of the programme outputs and the subsequent removal of outputs relating to participants moving into employment and starting their own social enterprises. As a result of this, activity was refocused around the provision of vocational opportunities and careers support aimed at graduates/postgraduates. As this represented a completely new area of activity an additional part time Project Officer was taken on by SWT to focus on this aspect of the programme.

There have been a number of changes of staff, and periods of maternity leave for all partners, throughout the project. Whilst the project has taken these as opportunities to review and refocus project activity these changes have also at times impacted on the continuity and cohesiveness of the project.

Growing Confidence & COVID-19

During the final 18 months of the project the outbreak of COVID-19 meant that opportunities for face-to-face delivery were severely limited and much of the planned activity was cancelled. In response to this SWT developed an on-line presence through the introduction of virtual Question Time sessions. These sessions invited a specialist in their field to talk about a specific subject and then participants were given the opportunity to ask them questions. Topics covered included; Flooding & River Managements, Climate Change and HS2. In addition to providing participants with the opportunity to engage with a range of external environmental professionals and increase their knowledge and understanding of these subject areas the sessions helped young people stay connected with the project and each other during lockdown. These sessions also provided an opportunity for SWT and FSC to work more closely together through the Youth for the Wild group.

FSC stopped all their in-person activities during the pandemic and moved to on-line engagement with their project participants. In addition to undertaking regular check-ins with their young people they also hosted talks, discussions, debates, and social events online, some in conjunction with SWT. As such the pandemic provided opportunities to work more closely with SWT and to trial the use of online activities which FSC had been considering prior to the pandemic as a way of engaging young people who didn't have transport or time to travel to the on-site activities.

Due to the nature of the young people that Fordhall worked with they were keen to provide as much continuity for their participants as possible. Where permission was agreed they continued their face-to-face work and adapted sessions in order to meet social distancing requirements.

5. Methodology

This is a formative evaluation which means that the evaluators were involved in the development of the monitoring and data collection framework and used evidence and data collected throughout the project to review its progress as project activity was being delivered.

Feedback and data for the final evaluation was collected from a number of sources:

- Analysis of participant survey responses completed throughout the duration of the project (work placement survey and training feedback survey – 34 and 242 responses received respectively)
- Analysis of the results of the end of project on-line participant survey (34 responses received)
- Face-to-face interviews with key staff from each of the delivery partner organisations via Zoom
- Analysis of the project case studies
- Focus groups with participants via Zoom

6. Evaluation findings

Over the lifetime of the programme Growing Confidence engaged a total of 6081 young people far exceeding its original target of 1000. The majority of these have been one-off engagements lasting a day or less and the remainder have been short term or long-term engagements.

The extent to which the project met its intended outcomes are discussed below but it is also worth mentioning that analysis of both the work placement and training feedback surveys shows a high level of satisfaction with the courses and opportunities run through the project. For example, 71% of training feedback respondents said that the course that they had been on had been 'excellent', a further 24% felt that it had been 'very good' and 4% that it had been 'good'. Similarly, 31 of the 34 respondents of the work placement survey rated their work placement as 'excellent' and the remaining 3 respondents rated it as 'very good'. These statistics demonstrate the high and consistent quality of the training and activities offered through the project.



Training course with FSC

7. Performance against outcomes

This evaluation has focused specifically on the four key outcomes of the Growing Confidence project. The extent to which the project has met the outcomes is discussed in detail below.

Outcome One – Young people will feel more connected to the local environment and are more environmentally aware.

Summary: The project has been highly successful at making young people feel more connected to the local environment through a combination of hands on experiences and access to experts and developing a sense of ‘team’ working towards a common purpose. Although the project attracted many with an existing interest in the environment it was also successful at improving knowledge about the environment and introducing some participants to the environment and natural world.

It is evident that the project has been highly successful in connecting young people with their local environment. Feedback from project participants attributes this connection primarily to the practical activity undertaken on-site through initiatives such as Make My Weekends Wild, placements and traineeships. Specifically, the following factors were commonly referenced:

- Engaging in outdoor activity that immerses the participants in nature resulting in a much more intensive and real experience.
- The hands-on nature of the activities that encourages direct interaction with the local environment.
- Undertaking activities that are rewarding and where participants are able to see the impact of their participation.

“The environment provides opportunities for young people to explore, feel free, take risks.”

Delivery partner

“Being very deep in it [nature] makes you feel much more connected to it.” Participant

“I love wildlife, its better being outdoors than indoors staring at 4 walls all flaming day. I like to get my hands dirty like to cooperate with people. It’s really good.” Participant

“I have learnt quite a lot about conservation work and environment, also how to enjoy the outdoors and take care of our countryside. For people in school, it’s a total new way to learn without being stuck in a classroom. It teaches you about being more aware of things in the outdoors.” Participant

Importance of hands-on experience

In its most simple form, the project has made young people more aware of their natural environment by exposing them to it which reinforces the value of 'in-the-field' activity focusing on practical tasks and providing real opportunities to get involved and make a real difference.

"It made me more aware of what is around me locally both in terms of physical space and trees." Participant

Identification, surveying and sampling activity has encouraged them to observe their environment in a much more focused way which has, alongside working with knowledgeable environmental professionals, helped them understand the fragility of the environment and the importance of its protection.

"You see so much more than you would if you were just walking through it." Participant



Creating stakes for Hedge laying during the university placement scheme

Introducing young people to the environment

It is worth noting here the success of the project at connecting young people to the environment even when they do not have an existing interest in the natural world. This is most notable in relation to the alternative curriculum strand of the project, where the environment is not the key driver for engagement and is in many cases the young person's first experience of environmental-based activity. However, there is evidence that even for these young people once they are exposed to environmental activity they develop a strong connection with it. This is demonstrated by the following case study of a participant that worked with Fordhall Farm.

CASE STUDY - Brandon



Fordhall Farm

Long term participant

Brandon started at Fordhall Farm in December 2018 and has been attending sessions ever since. When Brandon started with the project he lacked confidence in his own ability and would question everything he was doing. Through positive re-enforcement he has significantly improved not only his confidence but also his resilience and leadership skills.

Through the project Brandon has been involved in a wide variety of building projects and routine farm maintenance work e.g. fencing and tool maintenance and has been able to use these opportunities to develop his woodwork skills to enable him to make things. His time at Fordhall has also enabled him to develop important life skills like making a fire and cooking.

“Being on the Farm, it’s like an escape, a break and I really love building things and making things you know. I loved doing all the different sorts of fencing, it’s well hard but good. And basically, I really loved axing, and chopping wood for the fire the other week. It was my first time making a fire and then we cooked on it. Most things I do here I love. I loved the strimmer maintenance I did last year and I also loved getting my AQA certificate last week for using the draw knife. My parents were well proud!”

The project has also taught him a range of transferable skills such as learning to work with different types of people and how to remain focused on a task. His engagement in the project has also dramatically improved his behaviour.

“I have seen his self-confidence and esteem rocket. He is so enthusiastic, passionate and an immensely hard worker. To see him so alive and brimming with motivation is just amazing considering when he arrived, Brandon was one of the highest detention receivers in his whole school.” Youth Worker

Brandon has an ambition to be a mechanic when he leaves school however, he has said that if he isn't able to do that he would like to return to Fordhall to work on the farm.

“If the Youth Project stopped, I would be sad, really sad. I would be lost. I would miss it, a lot and like be depressed. If I don’t get to be a mechanic, I would work here.”

Survey Feedback

The success of the project at meeting this outcome is further corroborated by evidence from the end of project surveys. 27 of the 34 respondents said that they were either significantly or a lot more aware of the local environment and just over half of the work placement participants surveyed reported that their knowledge of the environment had increased a lot.

Similarly, the training feedback survey, of which there were 242 responses (across the range of training offered by the project e.g. from half day to 2 day+ courses) also demonstrates the effectiveness of the project in making participants more aware of the environment and increasing how much they care about it;

- 45% of respondents said that they were made more 'a lot' more aware of things that affect the environment and a further 45% were 'a bit' more aware.
- 46% said that the course had made them care 'a lot' more about the environment and 39% that it had made them care 'a bit' more.

Outcome Two – Young people will know how to take practical action which will have a positive impact on the environment.

Summary: The project was successful at giving young people the 'know how' to go on and take practical action themselves. The range of activity taken by participants was broad from involvement at a strategic level to ongoing practical action at a community level. The project also inspired behaviour change which demonstrates the success at the project in showing participants how to minimise their impact on the environment.

"...this project... has brought my attention to the more practical sides of conservation and has allowed me to explore the conservation of Shropshire countryside through a more practical lens which I love being involved in." Participant

As discussed above, one of the key strengths of the Growing Confidence project is that it provided opportunities for young people to get involved in practical environmental action under the guidance and tuition of experienced conservationists. This simultaneously provided participants with the 'know how' and a direct understanding of how their actions positively impacted the environment.

This outcome is measured not only through demonstrating that young people have been involved in taking practical action as part of the programme but that their engagement has acted as a catalyst for behaviour change or action outside of the programme. A key indicator of whether young people know how to take practical action is the likelihood of taking practical action outside of the programme. Results of the end of project survey show that 19 out of 34 respondents stated that their involvement in the project meant that they were 'likely' or 'very likely' to take action to help the environment. A further 15 respondents said that they were already taking action to help the environment.

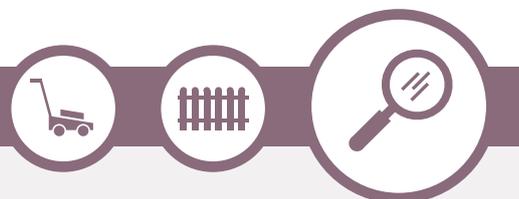
The results of the work placement survey also demonstrate the effectiveness of the project in equipping young people with the 'know how' for practical action. 33 out of 34 work placement survey respondents said that their experience had inspired them to do more to help the environment. Also, 30 participants said that they would start doing things that they know will help the environment. Interestingly, 31 respondents said that it was 'likely' they would stop doing things that they know hurt the environment which is evidence of the impact of the project in modifying behaviour to reduce negative impact on the environment.

“I was always interested in the environment, but this has got me much more involved and it has stopped me from using single use plastic.” Participant

Survey responses, feedback from project partners and in-depth interviews carried out with project participants all provide powerful evidence of the project’s ability to inspire individual action. Some examples of actions taken by participants include:

- Taking up roles on the national Our Bright Future’s Youth Forum and participating in anti-plastic campaigning work
- Getting involved in volunteering with other environmental organisations
- Independently undertaking checks on Wildlife reserves locally and reporting back incidents of fly tipping etc
- Using iRecord to record wildlife observations
- Acting as Project Champions
- Advising others on the re-use of materials, for example turning pallets into furniture.

CASE STUDY - Anthony



Fordhall Farm

Long-term participant

Anthony was introduced to the Growing Confidence project at Fordhall Farm by his social worker. The positive and engaging ethos at Fordhall was very important to Anthony as well as the opportunity to learn ‘real’ skills.

Anthony has learnt how to safely use tools and has used these new skills to help maintain the site through tasks such as replacing fence panels, putting up signposts and servicing the lawn mower. In undertaking these tasks, he is able to actively see how his input positively contributes to the development of the farm which has increased his sense of self-worth.

Not only has Anthony learnt practical skills at Fordhall but he has also achieved an AQA certificate, something which he is very proud of. As a result of the physical nature of the activity his fitness levels have also improved.

Anthony has also been able to socialise whilst at Fordhall and has made new friends which has benefited him greatly. Although some relationships have challenged him, he has been able to work through this and resolve differences. Anthony faced the prospect of leaving the project when he turned 26, however Fordhall were able to tailor an opportunity for him which has enabled him to continue to be part of the Fordhall community.

All these examples demonstrate the programmes’ success in creating the next generation of environmental activists.

Outcomes Three – Young people will have gained skills, knowledge and confidence which increases their employment opportunities

Summary: It is evident from participant feedback and perceptions of staff involved in the project that it has been extremely successful in providing young people with a diverse range of skills and has significantly increased their knowledge and understanding of environmental issues and the natural world. In addition, there's strong evidence to show that through their engagement in the project many young people have grown in confidence which consequently has improved their well-being. Undoubtedly all these factors contribute towards an increase in employability.

Gaining practical skills

Through their participation in the project young people have had the opportunity to develop a wide range of conservation skills such as charcoal making, coppicing, river sampling and species identification. This aspect of the project was highlighted by participants in the focus groups and one to one discussions as one of the most enjoyable aspects of the project. The opportunity to gain practical conservation experience was particularly valued by the graduates / students involved in the project who acknowledged the importance of gaining hands-on experience and the opportunity to apply their theoretical knowledge.

“I really enjoy sitting at my desk and researching conservation methods, reading articles on rewilding etc- but this project has allowed me to physically get involved with conservation.”

(Participant)

This has been particularly valuable for young people looking to pursue careers in the environmental sector or secure places on environmental courses as it's enabled them to develop new skills and experience which they have been able to add to their CV's and LinkedIn profiles.

The project also provided opportunities for young people to develop more general vocational skills such as woodwork, plastering and electrical skills through engaging them in building projects and routine farm maintenance tasks.

“I have really enjoyed learning hands-on skills, and learning to use a range of tools that I wouldn't have known what to do with 6 months ago. It is these skills I will take forward into my next role.” Participant

The success of the project in teaching participants practical skills is also demonstrated by the survey results:

- 33 out of 34 respondents to the work placement survey said that they had increased their practical skills and
- 26 out of 34 respondents to the end of project survey said that they had increased their practical skills 'significantly' or 'a lot'

When asked about the most useful aspects of the course in the training feedback form, many participants mentioned learning practical skills. For example, one respondent said:

“I thought our weekend was unique in that it combined practical conservation with ID skills. It was interesting to learn more about the environment that we were in so that we could really understand how our actions were helping it” Participant

Exposing people to a range of conservation skills has provided those with an interest in pursuing a career in the environmental sector with the opportunity to explore what aspects of conservation they are interested in and has also given them an insight into potential environmental careers. Working alongside experienced field officers and conservation specialists has enabled participants to develop their knowledge of a wide range of subject areas and in many cases to directly apply that knowledge through practical application. In addition, participation initiatives such as the Youth for the Wild forum and the on-line Question Time have provided opportunities for participants to explore a wider range of environmental topics and gain access to environmental experts.

CASE STUDY - Daisy



Shropshire Wildlife Trust

Short-term participant

University Student

Daisy was in the first year of a Geology degree at Birmingham University when she applied to do a summer placement with Shropshire Wildlife Trust (SWT). She had been keen to gain some practical experience of the environmental sector early on in her studies and therefore the opportunity to do the summer placement was perfect. The help that she received from staff at SWT to apply for the placement was invaluable;

“Tom from the Wildlife Trust was invaluable in supporting me with my application for the bursary and it was really reassuring to know that the staff at the Trust are willing to put aside their time to help, this is something that made me realise the positives of smaller organisations and charities compared to large corporations.”

Daisy gained invaluable practical skills as a result of the placement but also found being with other young people all with a shared interest in the Natural Environment powerful and rewarding:

“I found it inspiring to be immersed in a community of people with a shared passion for protecting the natural world. We were given an unparalleled insight into how the Trust is acting on a local level in the global fight against climate change and we got to play a genuine role in the various projects run and supported by Shropshire Wildlife Trust. The scheme upskilled us in many of the essential skills needed when working in the environmental sector, from bat surveying at Preston Montfort, to building microhabitats for small mammals and boxes for pine martens, coppicing and charcoal making in Clunton Coppice, bird ringing in Bicton and learning how to identify and

survey different native species of plants, mammals, amphibians and birds, as well as much more. The sheer scale of learning opportunities condensed into the placement was remarkable! We all really appreciated the balance between theoretical and practical sessions, as well as going out to work on the reserves, we also had seminar sessions with professionals from different roles in the sector, such as a wildlife consultant and a data mapper and planner. “

Daisy also liked the flexible approach to the placement and the fact that participants could tailor it to ensure that they got the most out of the experience. She also valued the activities that took place outside of the placement timetable e.g. re-painting benches and participating in a Youth for the Wild forum. Being able to communicate and network with other stakeholders e.g a local farmer and councillor was also very useful.

The experience was very worthwhile and inspiring for Daisy and as a result of her experience and some of the skills she learned she was able to secure a job as a work experience ambassador at Birmingham University.

“The placement exceeded all of my initial expectations. It was truly life changing and gave me a real sense of how awesome the environmental sector is!”

CASE STUDY - Kathryn

Shropshire Wildlife Trust

Hedgehog Officer Trainee

Kathryn has always had a passion for Hedgehogs and an interest in wildlife and conservation so when, through the Growing Confidence project, the opportunity to apply for a year-long placement as a Hedgehog Officer at Shropshire Wildlife Trust came up she jumped at the chance.

During her time as a trainee she undertook many talks about hedgehogs and started up her own project called 'Hedgehog Heroes of Shropshire' (<https://www.facebook.com/HedgehogHeroes>) (<https://www.shropshirewildlifetrust.org.uk/hedgehog-heroes>) which involved helping Shropshire residents make their gardens more hedgehog-friendly. She also provided guidance, advice and support to people who were keen on helping protect hedgehogs and became a committee member of the Shropshire Mammal Group. She also collaborated with a local Wildlife rescue organisation to design a Hedgehog Heroes tote bag.

“When it comes to my experience from the project, I just couldn't state how brilliant it has been in the right words. This project has paved a corridor for me to get my foot through the door in the conservation sector, and I am now on a steady track towards achieving my career goals. I really mean it when I say if it wasn't for this traineeship and project, I don't think I would be working in this sector right now no matter how hard I'd tried, I'm just so grateful it came along.”

Towards the end of her traineeship she became more involved with the People & Wildlife Team and started running events and visiting schools to do talks and support some of the trips. Kathryn has subsequently become the People & Wildlife Assistant at Shropshire Wildlife Trust and runs her 'Hedgehog Heroes' project alongside this role.

“If it wasn’t for this traineeship, I would not have had all of these brilliant experiences that are now proudly on my CV, and I continue to progress through my work with such a greater confidence in my work, but also greater self-confidence that I can make my own decisions and go for opportunities that I really want. I would so love to see a project like this either continue or return to provide more opportunities for young people aged 11-25 to really aid them in getting a foot into this highly competitive and difficult wildlife conservation sector, so will certainly support similar work in the future with a passion.”



Constructing a straw maze for an event at Fordhall Farm

Outcome Four – Partner organisations feel better skilled and informed about working with young people

Summary: The project gave partner organisations the opportunity to expand on existing work but also enabled them to offer something new to young people in Shropshire. It also helped partner organisation to build their understanding of ‘what works’ for young people and adapt their offers accordingly.

All of the delivery partners felt that their organisations were better skilled and informed about working with young people through their involvement in the project. Whilst both Fordhall Farm and FSC have an established track record of working with young people 11-24 and were building or adapting existing delivery models the project was a new area of development for SWT.

For The Field Studies Centre the programme has enabled them to expand their offer to individuals for the first time as opposed to solely school or college groups. This has enabled them to take a more flexible approach to the activities they have offered as they are not restricted by the requirements of the curriculum. The activity delivered through Growing Confidence has also tied in with aspects of existing FSC activity and has bridged the gap between other programmes such as Young Darwin and Duke of Edinburgh Awards. As such they are now able to provide a much broader and integrated offer to young people.

For Fordhall Farm the programme has enabled them to build on their existing experience of working with young people at risk of exclusion and embed this within the broader workings of the farm. The project also resulted in the creation of a dedicated youth space on the farm which has been transformational.

“As an organisation we are also better skilled, equipped and networked to carry on our work supporting vulnerable young people within our community.” Fordhall Farm Project Officer

For SWT Growing Confidence represented an opportunity to expand their offer to young people and to trial new approaches to working with an older age range. The majority of youth work previously undertaken by SWT was with a younger age group and was centred around primary school aged children and family-based activity. Whilst SWT had worked with secondary school children previously these had been short-term or small-scale interventions. As such Growing Confidence provided them with a vehicle through which to test the market with 11-24-year-olds in a more sustained way whilst building a new generation of volunteers and supporters for the Trust. Whilst SWT delivered a number of highly successful initiatives through the project, activity focused on the upper end of the age range, 16-24, proved to be more challenging and took a significant amount of time and resources to establish. This was in part due to the withdrawal of the Plunkett Foundation and the subsequent decision to refocus the project towards career progression and vocational opportunities instead of social enterprise development.



‘Water Water Everywhere’ course at Whixall Moss

Given that this was uncharted territory for SWT the project may have benefitted from undertaking market research with 16–24-year-olds earlier in the programme to explore the most effective ways of engaging this age group and what types of activities or opportunities would appeal to them. In addition, the project may also have benefitted from:

- Focusing on a smaller number of tried and tested initiatives e.g. building on the success of the Make My Weekends Wild model.
- Establishing a Young Person’s Steering Group to act as a sounding board for the project.

Whilst engaging this older age range in the project has at times been challenging it has significantly increased awareness and the profile of SWT amongst younger people locally. It has also challenged SWT to think differently and more creatively about their offer and has provided them with the opportunity to trial new approaches, learn valuable lessons and to build on their successes. One of the best examples of this is the introduction of on-line Question Time sessions which were introduced in response to the suspension of face-to-face activity due to the pandemic. These sessions demonstrated the value of using technology to engage a younger audience and to expand the reach of the project.

“As a result of Growing Confidence, we (SWT) now know where we want to go with young people and what young people want from us.” [Delivery Partner](#)



Discovering a toad during Grasses and Wild flower Identification training with SWT

Partnership approach

All delivery partners recognised that the partnership model had enabled them to deliver a project that offered a broad spectrum of activity targeted at different sectors of the youth market. In this sense the project successfully provided both entry-level opportunities through activities such as the alternative curriculum programme and taster sessions and progression routes for those looking to pursue careers in the environmental sector.

Where partners worked together to deliver joint activities the added value of this was highlighted as it provided opportunities for participants from across the project to work together and share learning. This also facilitated peer support amongst participants from different parts of the project.

“The social mixing and bonding has been valuable and beneficial. Shared interests but different previous experiences, different ages and different personalities - they have all come together through this project.” **Delivery Partner**

Whilst it didn't impact on the delivery of the project there was a sense amongst partners that at times the project did not maximise opportunities for partnership working. This was made more difficult by one of the partners being site specific, as opposed to Shropshire-wide, and the loss of the Project Coordinator which meant no-one was focused on pulling partners together or promoting a stronger partnership mentality. In addition, a number of planned joint development days and trips had to be cancelled as a result of Covid.

However, when partnership approaches were taken, these were felt to have added value. An unexpected outcome of the Pandemic on the project was that it led to joint working for two of the partners who worked together to develop online content for young people as an alternative to face-to-face sessions.



Creating Charcoal during the Wilder celebrations week

8. Lessons Learnt and Recommendations

The key lessons learned from the project are divided into 2 sections; firstly, the aspects of the project that worked well and should be replicated in future projects and secondly aspects of the project that could be done differently if a similar project was to be implemented in the future.

What worked well and should be replicated in the future

- 1 A range of high-quality environmental activities and opportunities for young people from diverse backgrounds was successfully made available and delivered to young people. Although the majority of participants already had an interest in the environment some did not. The project was successful at engendering an interest and commitment to the environment and natural world in these participants. **The quality of the field staff and the activity on offer** was largely the reason it was highly valued both by those with an existing interest in the environment and those who gained an interest through the project.
- 2 **The practical and hands-on aspects of the project were highly valued.** Regardless of age, gender, social class or academic ability, participants appreciated the opportunity to do something 'real' and see the impact of their involvement.
- 3 Partner organisations demonstrated their **ability to be flexible and responsive** throughout the project including during the Covid-19 Pandemic e.g. through the introduction of on-line sessions. These drew in a new audience for the project and enabled existing participants to stay engaged with the project whilst face-to-face activity was suspended. Flexibility and initiative were also demonstrated in re-negotiating project outcomes. Original project outcomes relating to the establishment of social enterprises was overly ambitious and consequently re-negotiated with the funder. This led to a renewed and successful focus on activity for graduates and postgraduates.
- 4 It's evident that there is **a real demand for graduate / post graduate practical conservation and environmental opportunities** that provide young people with direct experience of the sector. These opportunities proved to be instrumental in young people securing volunteering roles and paid work within the sector.
- 5 There is strong evidence that there is **significant value in engaging young people in long term group-based environmental activities.** In particular, the longer-term interventions had a *more significant* impact on mental health, well-being and sense of belonging.
- 6 The project delivery model of **bringing together groups of young people with a shared interest and similar attitudes towards the natural environment supported by conservation specialists was highly effective.** Through working together under the guidance of experienced and passionate project staff, young people have been able to share and build their skills, knowledge and confidence in an informal and social environment. Even those parts of the project that focused more on one-to-one delivery still encouraged peer to peer communication wherever possible with significant benefits for participants.
- 7 Although the focus of the project was on building skills, knowledge and confidence, which it did very well, in practice benefits for participants were much wider and resulted, in many cases, in significant **personal development and opportunities for progression.**

Aspects of delivery that could be done differently in the future

- 1 The project would have benefitted from more direct engagement with 16-24-year-olds during the initial phase of the project to help shape the project offer. This would have helped give the project a clearer sense of direction earlier in the programme.
- 2 Although the project exceeded its targets there is some evidence to suggest that **improved marketing and promotion**, informed by market research, would have been beneficial earlier in the project. There was consensus among participants that the activities offered by the project were unique i.e. the mix of practical and social opportunities but many had stumbled across the project and expressed that they would have been involved at an earlier stage if they had known about it sooner.
- 3 Although there is some evidence of successful partnership working through the project greater emphasis on 'adding value' through taking a collective approach may have strengthened the project even further. In future where partnership projects are undertaken consideration should be given at the outset as to how opportunities for joint delivery, shared learning and collaboration may be achieved and lead to a more integrated offer for young people in Shropshire.

Recommendations:

- 1 The key success factors of project delivery; high quality and hands on experiences and activities that bring young people together should be replicated in future projects aimed at this age group.
- 2 Greater emphasis should be placed on the ability of these types of projects to generate a sense of belonging and improve mental health and well-being amongst young people - based around a model of long-term interventions that bring young people together to work collectively.
- 3 The graduate/post-graduate market should be further explored and should form a key part of any 'young person' centred offer.
- 4 If new markets are being targeted then it is recommended that the target audience is actively engaged early in the development process to inform both the offer and the marketing and promotion of activities.
- 5 Future partnership projects may achieve added value, for the partner organisations and project beneficiaries, by identifying early opportunities for collaborative working and/or joint projects.



Enjoying a well-earned tea break on a very cold January day

9. Conclusion

Growing Confidence has been an extremely successful project and has achieved its ambitions of contributing towards the creation of the next generation of environmental activists. Young people involved in the project have developed their connection with the local environment, better understand the need to care for and protect the natural world and have gained the skills and knowledge to help them do that.

For those looking to pursue environmental careers the project has provided them with a wealth of opportunities to expand their knowledge and experience, gain first-hand insight into the sector and work alongside experienced environmental practitioners.

Equally, and arguably more significantly, Growing Confidence has provided young people with a sense of belonging and purpose. Somewhere they can share their passion with other like-minded young people and develop their own sense of being in an environment that encourages exploration, risk-taking, independence and initiative. This has provided the perfect 'hot house' for young people to increase their levels of self-confidence and self-belief, which could have a powerful and sustained impact on all areas of their life.

For the organisations involved in the delivery of this project it has provided them with a range of valuable opportunities; to work with a new audience, test-out new approaches and embed and enhance existing delivery models. Testament to the success of the project is that all partners have committed to continue to deliver project activity initiated through Growing Confidence, in some form, and have the strategic support and buy-in from their organisations to do this.



A trip to the Stiperstones during Wild Skills Week



The evaluation was conducted by Impact Consultancy & Research