



2021

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 skills**, **work-based competencies**, and softer **social and emotional skills**. The learning methods also vary, sometimes combining 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 have 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

1. INTRODUCTION

This report presents evidence from a thematic research study which 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 rationale and scope of the study are presented below, followed by a summary of the research methodology. Research findings are then presented and, finally, overall conclusions.

Rationale and scope of the study

This study forms one component of the longitudinal Our Bright Future programme evaluation, and was directly informed by the programme's Mid-Term Evaluation Report (July 2019)². The report presented detailed interim findings, including the presentation of evidence against the programme's four key outcomes³, the first of which relates, in part, to skills development:

Outcome 1: Participation in the Our Bright Future programme has had positive impacts on young people equipping them with the skills, experience and confidence to lead environmental change.

While the Mid-Term Evaluation Report includes a wealth of information and findings on the outputs, outcomes and impacts of the Our Bright Future Programme, resulting recommendations highlighted topics for further exploration. Following discussion, three topics were selected by the Programme Evaluation Panel for focussed evidence collection, analysis and evaluation:

- A study on the **prospects and pathways** of the Our Bright Future alumni;
- A study on the **skills gained** by Our Bright Future project participants; and,
- A study on how and to what extent Our Bright Future has empowered young people and equipped them to be **environmental leaders**.

This report presents the findings of the second of these three, exploring **skills development** as a result of participation in the Our Bright Future programme.

Primarily, it is intended that the thematic studies will contribute valuable evidence towards the Our Bright Future Final Evaluation Report (forthcoming, 2021), and will be of interest to an internal audience; however, it is also hoped that findings will be of wider use to funders and practitioners in the youth and environment sectors, at both programme design and delivery phases. This study further aims to make a contribution to the evidence-base on skills outcomes for young people with reference to environmental skills and/or developing skills in environmental settings. This may be of interest, for example, to policy makers, educators, and/or the third sector.

Methodology Overview

The study was carried out across 2020, with the primary research phase undertaken between May and September 2020. Full details of the methodology for the study are provided in [Appendix A](#) and an overview follows. As an initial step, an extensive literature review was undertaken, which can be found in full in [Appendix B](#).

² [Our Bright Future Mid-Term Evaluation Report](#), ERS Ltd and CEP (2019)

³ For other outcomes, see website: www.ourbrightfuture.co.uk/about/our-vision/

Study findings are drawn from: a literature and evidence review; in-depth telephone interviews with a sample of project managers; 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.

Research questions

The following research questions and sub-questions were investigated as part of this study:

1. **What skills have been gained by participants volunteering and engaging in the natural environment through Our Bright Future?**
 - a) What types and range of skills have Our Bright Future projects sought to help young people gain and *how*?
 - b) What is the existing *evidence* of skills development?
2. **Which approaches / models / settings for delivering skills are *most effective*?**
 - a) Does this *differ* for different groups of young people?
 - b) Have the approaches been informed by the programme/wider portfolio?
3. **What are the *outcomes* of skills development?**
 - a) For example, how are skills being *used* and in what settings? What are the *destinations* of those gaining skills through Our Bright Future?
 - b) To what *extent* are stated outcomes achieved by participants?
 - c) What are the key *success factors* in achieving stated outcomes?
4. **Are there particular benefits to developing skills (specifically soft skills) through experiences and volunteering in *natural environments*?**
 - o Are there any *benefits* to learning outside and through practical experiences? If so, which young people benefit most from this learning environment?

2. RESEARCH FINDINGS

This chapter presents the findings of the primary research by each key research question, namely:

1. *What skills have been gained* by participants volunteering and engaging in the natural environment through Our Bright Future?
2. Which approaches / models / settings for delivering skills are *most effective*?
3. What are the *outcomes* of skills development?
4. Are there particular benefits to developing skills (specifically soft skills) through experiences and volunteering in *natural environments*?

Q1. What skills have been gained by participants volunteering and engaging in the natural environment through Our Bright Future?

Sub-questions:

- What types and range of skills have Our Bright Future projects sought to help young people gain and how?
- What is the existing evidence of skills development?

Key findings:

A variety of skills were developed by projects participants, across a wide range of skills domains; most commonly practical skills, and social, emotional and personal skills, respectively.

A range of evidence exists of skills development. There are clear limitations in measuring skills gains of participants; however, projects presented a range of corroborating evidence types.

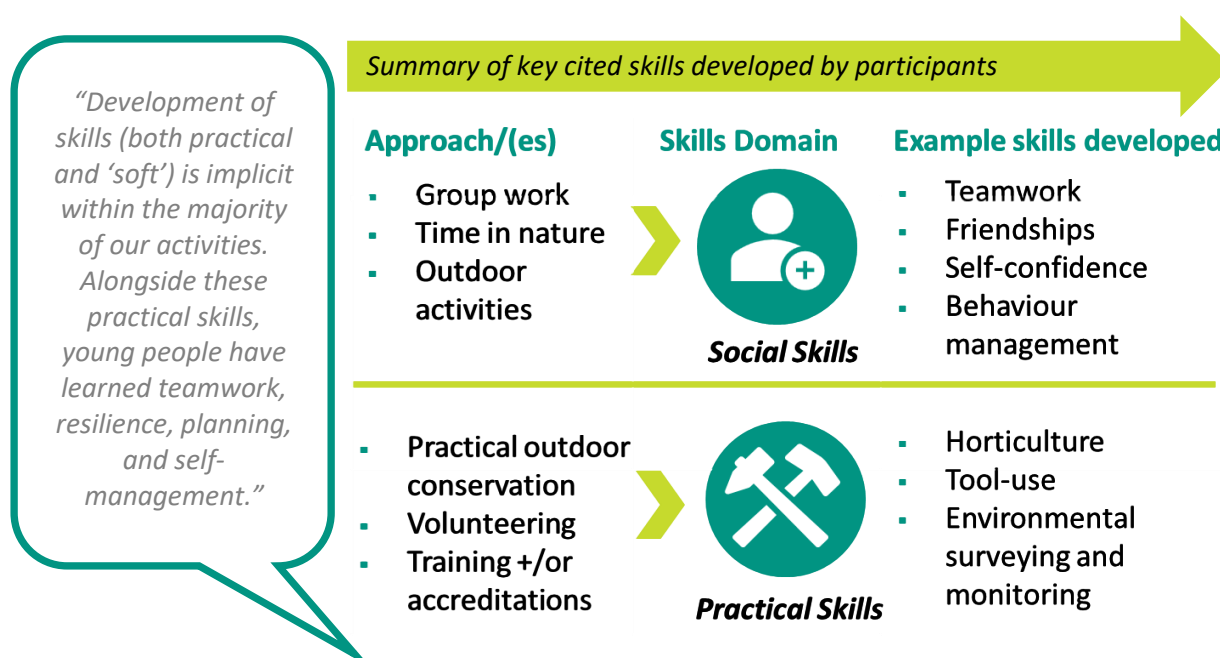


Figure 1: Summary of key skills gained and how

What are the key skills gained by participants?

Firstly, Project Managers (PMs) were asked to specify the **key skills gained** by participants, i.e., those skills most commonly gained as a result of project activities. In response, the majority of PMs expressed that participants had developed a range of both hard **and** soft skills -across various domains- as a result of project activities. The most common themes were “practical” skills and “social” skills, which are further explored below.

When asked to consider **what proportion of participants** typically gained the key skills cited, estimates varied. PMs suggested that between 75% and “all” of those who completed a designated activity program saw this gain to some extent. It was recognised that specific gains are harder to track for those engaging on an informal basis and/or for those gaining softer skills compared with accreditations.

Table 2.1 below, based on PMs' qualitative responses, illustrates the range of skills gained by project participants, alongside an indication of activities commonly supporting these gains. It should be recognised that there is unavoidable overlap between the categories of skills; further, certain approaches may lead to multiple skills, and there are multiple routes to gaining particular skills.

Table 2.1 Summary of key skills gained by participants (non-exhaustive)		
Type of skill	Example skills gained	Example approaches
Practical (including practical environmental tasks)	■ Horticultural skills e.g., planting, tackling invasive species, gardening, coppicing ■ Environmental surveying and monitoring, ■ Habitat creation and management ■ Tool use e.g., saws, drills, knives ■ Farming skills e.g., planting, animal care, farm labour ■ Use of equipment e.g., stoves ■ Survival skills e.g., fire lighting, shelter-building, cooking skills ■ Construction skills	■ Outdoor, practical activities and conservation tasks ■ Volunteering placements ■ Training opportunities ■ Accredited and non-accredited qualifications ■ Informal engagement.
Social, emotional and personal skills	■ Social skills e.g., team-working, ability to form friendships, increased empathy ■ Self-confidence and self-esteem ■ Mental health / personal awareness / emotional and behavioural self-management.	■ Group work with peers and/or communities ■ Practical outdoor activities ■ Time in nature.
Environmental skills	■ Academic skills and knowledge ■ Environmental campaigning ■ Environmental awareness.	■ School / college-based activities ■ Campaigning activities ■ Internships.
Work-based skills	■ Improved attitude towards work ■ Professional skills ■ Communication and interpersonal skills ■ Planning events / projects ■ Public-speaking ■ Time management and organisation ■ Presentation skills ■ Leadership and mentoring skills	■ Structured programmes, traineeships and work placements ■ Accredited and non-accredited qualifications ■ Campaigning and events ■ Youth panels ■ Youth-led activities and peer-mentoring approaches

Practical skills

As mentioned, practical skills were most commonly cited as one of the key skills domains developed by participants. It is worth noting that practical skills have tended to be more easily verifiable, as the activities are often task-based with a directly observable result. Nevertheless, it is clear that through skills-centric activities in a range of settings (e.g., community gardens, local parks, and various natural habitats), young people have had opportunities to learn new practical capabilities. Whilst *theoretical* learning has been possible in classroom-settings in some instances, it is clear that the outdoor environment was essential to the practical *application and development* of practical skills.

In some cases, participants' practical skills have been gained through flexible, informal engagement, whereas in other cases, practical skills have been accredited through evidence-based awards, and/or have formed the basis of structured programmes.

Project example: practical skills

As an illustrative example, a participant taking part in a **one-year horticulture apprenticeship** through an Our Bright Future project provided testimony of skills gained. The participant stated that they had had the opportunity to work across a number of outdoor settings through their year with the project, experiencing a diverse range of habitats and developing a wide variety of practical skills. This included, for example: gardening and plant care; use of strimmers; use of leaf blowers and lawnmowers; use of hand tools; and, repair of poly-tunnels. Further, the apprenticeship provided the opportunity to record and accredit learning.



Social, emotional, and personal skills



Being part of group, where they (literally) can't do a task on their own - they have to learn how to be a team player and develop communication and listening skills." – Project manager respondent

The category *social, emotional and personal skills* covers a whole host of competencies, from interaction with others, to self-management of emotions and behaviours. These types of skills are reportedly gained to some degree across *all activity types*, and for participants with a range of characteristics. To caveat this, development across this skills domain does appear dependent on the **length and/or depth on engagement** (i.e., a longer duration, or shorter, time-intensive engagement).

Key learning: the extent to which participants develop existing / new social, emotional, and personal skills, appears dependent on the length and/or depth of engagement with the Programme.

As might be expected, the *inclusion of group work* is considered key in developing social and interpersonal skills and confidence. Most commonly, young people interacted with peer groups of a similar age; however, when opportunities for interaction with other groups were provided, for example in wider community and professional settings, this in turn broadened the confidence and ability of young people to interact socially with a wider range of people.

"He is also finding the team building and negotiating with different personalities a real benefit to his own social and leadership skills." –Supporting evidence, testimony from a parent of a participant

For a number of projects, the young people engaged often begin from a position of being **socially disengaged or isolated**. As such, confidence in social settings was described by project managers as a common barrier for those young people, affecting them in a range of ways. Reportedly, the group nature of outdoor activities develops this skillset, as it requires teamwork and collaboration in order to successfully complete a project or task, all the while supported by staff, and in a safe environment.

It was noted that this type of skill can prove particularly impactful for individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds, those with complex needs, and/or those with a characteristic which may affect ability to engage socially (such as Autism Spectrum Disorders {ASD} or Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder {ADHD}, for example).

Key learning: groupwork supports a range of social skills development and instils confidence. The development of social, emotional, and personal skills is considered particularly impactful for socially disengaged and/or isolated young people, and/or those with complex needs.

In addition, emotional and personal skills such as behaviour management, or ability to manage anxiety, were cited as important benefits of participation, for some individuals. It is more challenging to establish the causal factors for such gains, however, it is likely that the non-classroom setting makes a contribution. This factor explored in more detail in the response to research question 4.

Project example: social, emotional, and personal skills

As an indicative example, one project submitted a testimony from a teacher stating that a group of school-aged young people had made gains in social skills and confidence at a much faster rate than their peers. This progression was seen after the project had provided opportunities for them to work in small groups in outdoor settings, which had reportedly helped them in feeling more comfortable speaking and presenting in group settings once they returned to the classroom environment.



Environmental skills

Many environmental skills can also be defined as practical in nature, and thus fall into the category outlined above. *Environmental knowledge and awareness* are out of scope for this study; however, a couple of PMs emphasised the ways in which broader environmental awareness *supports the application of skills* within a range of settings. For example, in construction, this may relate to awareness of and ability to source local materials. For application of outdoor skills, this may support being conscious of protecting species and working in an environmentally friendly way.

Moreover, activities focussed toward developing environmental awareness (for example, events, campaigning activities, and/or classroom-based work) have, in turn, supported skills development. For example, a minority of projects mentioned higher-level technical and academic environmental skills developed by participants. This included, for example, use of Geographic Information Systems (GIS), computer-aided design (CAD), and drone training.

Work-based skills

Work-based skills range from transferrable skills (such as time-management and teamwork) to job-specific skills (such as particular vocational skills or competencies). Common settings in which participants developed skills of this type included: internships; traineeships; qualifications; and volunteering or work placements. The opportunity to develop specific work-based skills, often in “real” work environments, was felt to contribute to young people’s *employability and work-readiness*, particularly if they were approaching or had passed school-leaving age. According to respondents, this progression was further supported by provision of dedicated coaches, and through clearly linking skills attainment to future employment opportunities.

“(Apprentices are developing) understanding of what it means to be in a workplace and workplace behaviours - because they came into the office and had that expectation of behaviours the same as everyone else.” – Project manager respondent

Teamwork, although already mentioned previously, was reiterated as an important *transferable skill* of direct relevance to the workplace.

Work-relevant skills reported varied considerably. Most often, this related to the practical vocational and/or practical environmental skills already outlined, developed through skills training in the outdoors.

Additionally, involvement in activities such as *youth forums or panels*, as well as projects supporting participants to deliver youth-led *campaigns and events*, reportedly led to a distinct group of skills. This included: project planning and management; presentation and public speaking; written skills (e-mails, proposals etc.); chairing meetings; and budgeting. Youth leadership is the subject of a parallel thematic study, and so is explored within the corresponding report in greater depth.

Life skills and cognitive skills

Life skills and cognitive skills (i.e., skills which support independence and problem-solving, for example) were cited less often by respondents; however, these benefits are not typically recorded for routine monitoring.

Even so, a few PMs mentioned that participation had led to a gain in life skills for some participants, particularly those who may have had *limited experiences of visiting outdoor settings*, and/or those who had additional needs. For example, benefits included: participants learning how to look after their belongings; independently planning food and drink; selecting appropriate clothing and equipment; and/or, developing punctuality. Illustrating this, supporting evidence from an educator of one group taking part in an Our Bright Future project described how participants had built a “mature outlook” and become more responsible.

There were also a few suggestions from PMs of an improvement in cognitive skills for some participants, including improved problem-solving and enquiry, and conversation and listening. This manifested, for example, in selecting appropriate materials for a task, proactively checking work for errors, asking insightful questions, or seeking ways a task could be performed more efficiently.

Qualifications typically gained

Qualifications have been considered separately to skills. The majority of projects engaged offered accreditation in some form, with *a wide variety of approaches and options* offered between and within projects, with an example of this range below. In contrast to the example which follows, some projects have focussed on offering one specific course or one particular accreditation type.

Project example: qualifications offered

Demonstrating the bespoke options available to participants, supporting evidence submitted by one PM recorded that *40+ different courses* - offered by a diverse range of providers and awarding bodies - had been attended. 131 young people had taken part, with 92 achieving certification. *Topics were wide-ranging* and included, for example: Safe Handling and Application of Pesticides; Chainsaw Maintenance; Outdoor First Aid; Health & Safety; courses relating to agriculture, machinery, and vehicles; digital marketing; botanical drawing; community engagement; and, marine biology.



Moreover, projects vary in their *relative focus upon accreditation* as part of project delivery, as well as the *scale* of participants achieving awards.

For example, one project reported that *16 young people* had completed apprenticeships since the beginning of the programme, and another project stated that *1,362 accreditations* had been awarded to date. Of course, these qualifications are not equivalent, and some are far more resource-intensive than others. While some awards can be gained in a few weeks (e.g., some AQA units), others require 18-months (e.g., apprenticeships).

Further, some projects have developed *bespoke accreditations or awards* to meet the specific needs of participants, and, in turn, to encourage skills development. Most projects consulted offer a *variety or combination of award types*, as illustrated in the **Table 2.2** below.

Project #	Externally accredited awards or qualifications	Non-accredited external awards or qualifications	Bespoke awards or qualifications (designed by project)	Apprenticeships and/or work placements
1				x
2	x			
3	x	x	x	
4	x			x
5		x	x	
6	x			x
7		x	x	x

Given this considerable variety, the qualifications presented in the bullet points below are illustrative of qualifications more *typically* gained, seeking to demonstrate the common *range, scope, type, and level*. This summary is based on PM interviews and supporting evidence submitted, which, in some cases, included full, extensive lists of qualifications awarded alongside outputs.

- **Accredited qualifications:** AQA unit awards; Level one and level two apprenticeships e.g., environmental conservation; ASDAN qualifications; Agored Cymru; City & Guilds awards.
- **Nationally recognised awards:** John Muir Award; Duke of Edinburgh (contribution to gaining).

The majority of qualifications centred on an *environmental and/or outdoor working focus* (for example, woodland skills, tool or vehicle handling, animal care etc.). These were typically Level 1 or 2 or equivalent, and predominantly practical in nature. To a lesser extent, qualifications or certifications have been awarded in wider topic areas, such as construction (including CSCS cards) and Food Hygiene, more closely reflecting the specific focus of particular projects within the portfolio. However, topics such as leadership, independent living, teamwork, and personal planning were also covered, demonstrating that *life skills and social skills have also been formally recognised* alongside the assessment of practical, environmental and vocational skills.

The *John Muir Award is one award commonly used* across a number of projects. It is broadly considered flexible and widely applicable. In one project alone, **216 young people** have achieved the award since 2016. As an indication, evidence submitted by PMs -including testimony from a few educators and parents- related that as a result of participating in the John Muir award, young people had gained in confidence and engaged with nature. One PM commented that the evidence required to gain this award was considered less rigorous than some other aforementioned accreditations.

Although a range of approaches are taken, a common factor in a number of cases seemed to be the reported *sense of achievement* young people felt in gaining an award. This mirrors the finding within the literature review that recognition, via certification and awards⁴, is valuable⁵.

Key learning: regardless of the award type or level, recognition of learning provides a valuable sense of achievement for young people.



“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

Further, the Economic and Social Research Council (ERSC), found that there are few opportunities nationally for young people to gain accreditations through *voluntary conservation work*⁶. This may indicate that Our Bright Future is relatively unique within the landscape of provision. Supporting this, as set out previously, the majority of PMs interviewed stated their project included accredited elements. A breakdown of the practical components for each project is below in **Table 2.3**.

Project #	Volunteering	Practical conservation	Outdoor activity	Environmental-skills focus
1				
2		x	x	
3	x	x	x	
4			x	x
5		x	x	x
6		x	x	x
7	x	x	x	x

b) What is the existing evidence of skills development?

As set out in the literature review (**Appendix B**), the approach to *skills evidence* across the environmental sectors is largely non-standardised, meaning that it is difficult to draw comparisons and infer wider lessons about what works. Often, practical and resource considerations underpin this variance. In line with this finding, approaches taken across projects (outside of quarterly and annual reporting at a programme-level) vary, and are not directly collatable / comparable. This variance makes sense and is broadly positive, given equally varied skills aims, target groups, and project models.

Moreover, the literature review noted complexities involved in independently verifying skills, and seeking robust, corroborating sources of evidence. The nature of *existing evidence* of skills outcomes through Our Bright Future was therefore considered as part of this study, in order to understand not only *what skills* were gained, but *how we know this*.

⁴ National Youth Social Action Survey (2015 and 2016).

⁵ Brewer (2013).

⁶ [ERSC, Environmental Skills for Young People in Rural Communities.](#)

Firstly, PMs were often in a good position to understand participants' skills gains, often via direct observation, monitoring, and assessment. Secondly, where young people have gained skills connected with accredited or evidence-based qualifications, this acts as a route for verification of the competencies defined within the respective assessment framework(/s).

In addition to this, PMs detailed a wide variety of methods they employ in order to establish and record skills outcomes, and submitted a selection of accompanying evidence as part of this study. Importantly, not *all* skills gains or outcomes are *formally recorded* by projects, for a range of practical and methodological reasons. The approaches taken to gathering evidence of skills outcomes to date are summarised below (non-exhaustive).

Common routes to evidencing skills gained



Figure 2: common routes to evidencing skills

- **Accreditations and awards:** successful achievement of awards demonstrates that certain skills criteria have been adequately fulfilled. This often involves the submission of workbooks, photographs, and other supporting evidence to assessors. Some projects have internal assessors. This is broadly considered a simple route for verifying skills.
- **Survey and interview methods (self-reporting by the young person):** a variety of survey approaches are used by projects e.g., Likert scales; quantitative and qualitative questionnaires; semi-structured interviews; hands-up surveys; periodic surveys completed at intervals e.g., weekly, bi-annually, or at start and end points. Illustrative survey findings are detailed below.

"The results from these surveys indicated that following completion of the peer mentoring course, over 60% of those completing the course (n=22) showed improvement in their emotional mind-set and their confidence from their initial starting position." –Supporting evidence, project survey analysis.

"1091 pupils showed increased knowledge of the green economy" compared with before and after delivery of a session, in the collated results of hands-up survey. Understanding was subsequently verified by teachers, with all teachers responding affirmatively to a series of questions. –Supporting evidence, project feedback.

- In some cases, projects' methods incorporated and sought **verification** of quantitative, self-reported results, either from line managers, teachers, or parents, for example. Some *limitations of self-reporting were identified*, including the fact that individuals' self-assessment may be subject to fluctuation or bias, depending on how they feel in the moment or "what sort of day they've had".
- In most cases, the survey tools and questionnaires deployed by projects were *bespoke rather than standardised*, tailored to the age group and needs of respondents, as well as to the project's target outcomes. As one example, emoji questionnaires were used for younger participants.

- **External evaluation:** most projects consulted had commissioned an evaluator to prepare a report on their project. Again, approaches vary, according to the nature of the project, evaluation budget, and the established evaluation brief. Not all evaluations collect specific skills data or ask skills-centric questions. Some projects have chosen a specific focus; for example, one project is pursuing data on participant well-being. Demonstrating the robustness of the research, the project supporting evidence set out that the report has been subject to independent scrutiny for publication in a medical journal. Taken as a whole, project evaluations offer skills evidence to varying extents, and to varying levels of robustness.
- **Seeking corroborating evidence** e.g., verification of skills and progression of young people from line managers, employers, parents or caregivers, project staff, peers, teachers or educators etc., with testimony providing an additional perspective on skills gained. This was relatively common in supporting evidence submitted, adding a layer of robustness. Importantly, these testimonies often demonstrated attempts at *attribution* of project activities to stated outcomes.

(Participant's) confidence has grown tremendously since being involved with the >project<. He has developed existing skills, learnt many new skills, and works better in a group situation as a result. Both myself and (participant) feel that he has been able to engage in activities he wouldn't have otherwise had the opportunity to do if it wasn't for his involvement in the project. To gain an award at the end of the project filled (participant) with a huge sense of achievement. He enjoyed the project so much he has decided that he would like to work as a conservationist when he is older. He is now currently studying environmental management and geography at IGCSE level as a stepping stone to achieve his long-term goal." –Supporting evidence, excerpt of testimony from participant's parent.

- **Case studies:** projects routinely collect and compile case studies of the impact and journey for particular participants. Some of these are more skills-focussed, though generally they seek to tell the story of a participant's engagement more holistically. Case studies are key for projects to demonstrate the **depth** of impacts, as opposed to the **scale** of impacts.
- **Observation and reflection:** project staff routinely make assessments of skills and progression during delivery, in order to inform the approach taken and aid the participant. In some cases, observations and quotes from the session are recorded to form a record of skills gains or other learning. Some example quotes recorded by one PM are detailed below:

"Can I show you something, I think someone has done some coppicing wrong over here?"

"I'm proud of my map reading at the beginning."

"We should bring lots [of coppiced wood] up here and make the dead hedges so that people stick to the paths."

- **Visual CVs (bespoke creative methods):** although specific to one project, the "visual CV" is worth mentioning as, uniquely, it is a method of *capturing* and also *enhancing* progress. Participants are supported to electronically design and develop a visual CV of their engagement with the project, what they have learned, and what skills they have gained, and to present this in a creative way. In addition to recording progress, the process facilitates participant reflection, as well as providing an output they can use directly and immediately, e.g., when approaching employers. Within the visual CVs submitted as supporting evidence, participants described, for example, that they have attained more confidence as a result of the project, detailed manual and transferrable skills, as well as soft skills and work-based skills. Photographs verifying their work were also included.

- **Longitudinal Study:** one project commissioned a longitudinal study from an external organisation to provide additional, focussed evidence. The aim of the research was to explore the effect of outdoor learning on a group of participants over time, across a range of factors, including: personal confidence and self-esteem; social and emotional learning (SEL); classroom attainment, and behavioural development. The study provides insight across these domains, and is discussed in more detail as part of research question four. One noted limitation of the research was the lack of access to school data on academic performance, which the research team intended to incorporate to examine whether achievement correlated with the effects of engagement in the project. Some findings of the study indicate participant gains in practical and social skills.

In addition to those set-out previously, common limitations of data collection relating to skills included:

- **Difficulty capturing soft skills achievement**, as resource is directed towards measuring progress towards the central aims of the project. This is a valid prioritisation of resource, and, sensibly, also stems from a desire to limit “survey-fatigue” of participants;
- **Limitations in collecting data from external stakeholders**, e.g., young people’s employers or educational institutions due to a lack of access, or confidentiality requirements;
- **A lack of baseline data on existing or prior skill-levels;**
- In some cases, **engagement figures** are used by projects as proxies for the number of young people gaining skills, or as evidence of achievement of the particular outcome.

Overall, PMs were able to provide *multiple sources and types of evidence* to suggest that cited skills had been gained, supporting anecdotal examples provided in interviews. In many cases, clear attempts had been made to establish *attribution to the activities delivered by the project*, and demonstrate *change* compared to previous levels. Also, although many methods incorporated self-reporting, this was often supported with wider corroborating accounts of participants’ development to verify skills.

In terms of limitations, often sample sizes were small (though in some cases this is reflective of small groups of engaged participants). Further, as mentioned, evaluative materials and studies often had a separate focus of specific relevance to the project; therefore, not all submitted evidence is of direct relevance to this study. Finally, although it is a positive in many senses that evaluation methods are bespoke at a project-level, this does limit ability to collate data and findings at a programme-level. Similarly, PMs reflected both pros and cons of the bespoke nature of skills evidence collection.

Counterfactual and attribution

Alongside evidence, it is important to consider the *counterfactual* (what outcomes may **have happened anyway** in the absence of Our Bright Future), and *attribution* (the extent to which stated outcomes are as a result of the intervention). These factors were explored qualitatively with PMs.

First of all, it is necessary to consider where else young people may have been able to seek similar skills provision in the absence of Our Bright Future. PMs related, on the whole, that equivalent opportunities would likely have **not** been available, particularly opportunities of *equal duration* and to such a *bespoke level*. Such opportunities were considered lacking amidst prolonged, national-scale cuts to youth provision, and a perceived focus of relevant, accredited provision towards adult learners.

“(Participant) highlighted that the group don’t do anything else apart from their school work and their part time jobs, so having the opportunity to do something like this has given them essential life skills.” –Supporting evidence, teacher of participant

A number of projects posited that their offer was unique in their region. In one case, offering **paid opportunities** was seen as important as, although other training provision was made available locally, this was unpaid, thus increasing barriers for particular beneficiaries. Crucially, their access to similar opportunities may have been limited in the absence of Our Bright Future.

“They would have to do it for free. Only some young people would have been able to (attend). We’re aiming to reach those without access, for example, those who couldn’t have afforded or (wouldn’t have had the) confidence to apply (to other opportunities).” –Project manager respondent

In other cases, availability of other skills provision in the locality has *supported* rather than duplicated or displaced project outcomes. For example, in some cases this enabled participants to progress to further training courses upon conclusion of their engagement in their Our Bright Future project.

Secondly, PMs were asked to consider the *attribution* of stated outcomes to the project. Quantitative estimates (of % attribution) alongside qualitative explanation were gathered. Taken together, responses suggested PMs confidence that the interventions had led, in part of in full, to the stated outcomes for young people. PMs described that case studies collated as part of project delivery attest to this, with young people directly stating attribution in a number of cases (e.g., stating they secured a job **as a result of** participating / developing skills on the project).

Interestingly, attribution of employment outcomes was most often reported as higher (or at least more observable) where participation was attached to a defined qualification or traineeship / placement. Further supporting attribution, according to a number of PM responses it was rare that young people were involved in adjacent initiatives at the same time as having been involved with Our Bright Future. Many were known to be NEET at the point of engagement, or were in school but not accessing any other extra-curricular opportunities.

Q2. Which approaches / models / settings for delivering skills are most effective?

Sub-questions:

- a) Does this differ for different groups of young people?
- b) Have the approaches been informed by the programme/wider portfolio?

Key findings:

Approaches to skills development are diverse. Overall, approaches tended to be more effective when provision was: tailored to young people; supportive; delivered in small groups; and of a longer duration.

Before responding directly to the research questions, it is worth touching briefly on the *approaches to skills development* taken by the projects. Whilst it is not possible to elaborate on each component of project's delivery models in detail, some key contrasts and commonalities are highlighted below⁷.

Common features and differences in project approaches to developing skills

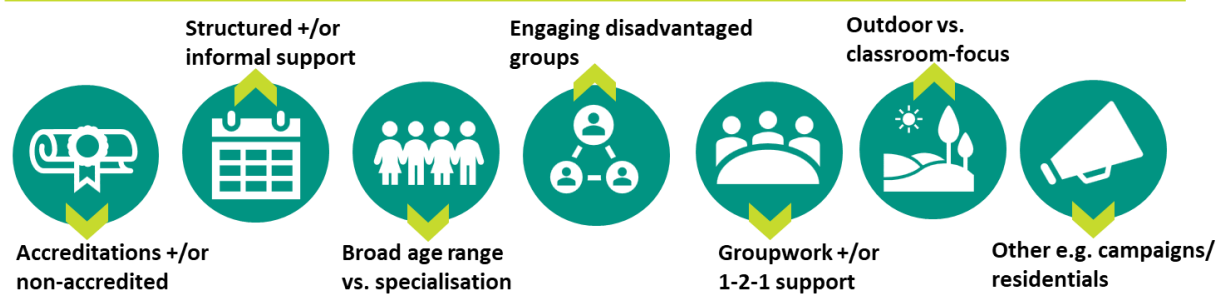


Figure 3: common features and differences in approach

- The majority of projects interviewed offered **accreditations**, although the format and approach varied considerably, including, for example, in-house ranger schemes, apprenticeships, and/or unit awards.
- Projects employed a range of **structured / formal** (i.e., defined programme or duration of activity) and **unstructured / informal support** (e.g., open-ended / drop-in activity), sometimes in conjunction, sometimes not.
- Most projects worked within the broad **target age range** of 11-24, whilst one or two specialised (e.g., on those under 17). Many projects were focussed on recruiting from **disadvantaged and/or vulnerable groups** facing barriers to attainment, some exclusively.
- All projects incorporate **group work as a key component**, and some also incorporate **one-to-one delivery** for particular aspects.
- Only one project focussed **primarily on classroom-based activity**, the rest being primarily outdoors and/or practically focussed (emphasising the environment to varying extents).
- Other approaches included **social action campaigns / campaigning activity**, and one PM who responded cited **residentials** as one key component of their work.

⁷ *Anticipating varied approaches, and to avoid a very extensive list of activities, PMs were asked to complete a question defining their **key** delivery approach against a number of typologies. Seven responded. Projects could select **multiple** "key" characteristics.

Taken together, it is clear that approaches are varied and often mixed-method. Some projects have one distinct strand of skills-based activity, whereas for others, the approach to developing skills is embedded throughout multiple elements. Likewise, for some, skills development forms a core stated aim or target outcome, whilst other projects do not have specific skills targets. Further, skills development is prioritised differently for different projects. For example, one project intentionally *shifts focus away from gaining qualifications* -to emphasise the distinction between the project and a school setting- in order to better engage the target audience. In essence, there is no single, common model; yet, there are common features, as outlined above.

“I would say the practical skills developed through activities are secondary to our project; our project is about improving mental health and softer skills, and that supports that practical skill development.” –Project manager consultee

Examples or excerpts of project target outcomes relevant to skills are provided in the points below (non-exhaustive). Often, progress is measured by projects through linked quantitative output targets.

- This programme will 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*. This will be achieved through developing technical knowledge, and giving them the *skills and self-assurance* to establish their own business within the green economy;
- 500 young people increasing their life chances, by increasing their *employability/enterprise prospects, knowledge and skills* during the life of the project;
- (Young people will be) More *empowered through new skills and knowledge* to create positive environmental change;
- At least *60 % of participants will have gained training or accreditations*, and with this will be more resilient and better equipped and trained to be actively involved in improving and contributing to community green spaces.
- *Up-Skill* young people (particularly those in need and enable entry to employment).

Specific Approaches

As mentioned, projects have formulated a wide range of approaches *in relation to developing skills*. In addition, participants are often given further ability to choose how they engage with skills provision. Therefore, it is challenging to state a “typical” delivery model or “participant engagement journey”. Instead, an indicative list of broad approaches and delivery models is listed below.

- | | |
|---|---|
| ▪ Work-based training | ▪ John Muir awards |
| ▪ Certificated practical training and enterprise training | ▪ Structured skills programmes |
| ▪ Events | ▪ Informal and responsive provision |
| ▪ Practical conservation work | ▪ Campaigning activity |
| ▪ Young Ranger schemes | ▪ Residentials |
| ▪ Mentorship schemes | ▪ Courses for volunteers |
| ▪ Environmental based activities in secondary schools | ▪ Apprenticeships |
| ▪ Youth forums and summits | ▪ Traineeships, of flexible duration (minimum 4 weeks, generally 3 to 6 months) |
| ▪ Local and community based environmental projects | ▪ Bespoke, flexible outdoor activities led by young people’s preferences |
| | ▪ Internships linked with clear skills objectives |

What approaches / models / settings for delivering skills are most effective?

Of the vast array of approaches outlined, PMs were asked to consider which approaches, models, or settings have proven *most effective*. Findings have been broken down into a number of themes, including: models for effective engagement; structured and informal provision; variance in approach; and required resources / inputs.

What models are effective for engaging young people in environmental skills provision?

Key learning: a range of approaches have proven effective in developing skills. A key success factor, in most cases, is the ability to tailor provision offered to the specific needs of participants.

The overarching message is that there is no single route to building skills; rather, a range of approaches are effective in building skills of various types, with various groups of young people, in various settings. Rather than developing the “right” model, success frequently appears contingent on adapting and tailoring provision to participants’ needs. This is echoed in the response of one PM who posited that there’s not necessarily one approach which is more effective than other; rather that *“For different young people different systems will work. The system you choose to use determines more about the young people you attract rather than what the young people will get out of it”*.

For example, an intervention may be “packaged” as a skills programme in the first instance, and the *environmental aspects may later be introduced by “stealth”* rather than as a key selling point of the offer. In other cases, the environmental aspects may be the key selling point, and the skills may be introduced by “stealth”. In both cases, the young person ultimately achieves both outcomes; however, they were engaged due to different motivating factors. In terms of attracting participants more broadly to the skills provision, motivations have varied, whether that is the draw of a paid traineeship, an opportunity to “make a difference”, accreditation, or a desire to increase well-being.

Again, thinking about developing the initial offer, one PM related that, due to the project’s work in schools, the *offer was developed in conjunction with educators* to gain buy-in and ensure relevance. This again incorporates elements of “stealth”, integrating environmental topics within the existing curriculum and activities delivered. Designing the approach to be reflective of the setting it is delivered in has reportedly enabled more effective promotion and uptake in additional schools.

Key learning: it is not always necessary/most effective to lead with an “environmental” offer in order to develop environmental skills in young people. Often, there is an alternative motivating factor for the young person and so this can form the initial focus, with environmental aspects introduced later.

When recruiting young people for work-based programmes, one PM similarly explained that the offer has needed to *match and appeal to young people’s existing level of environmental understanding*, avoiding terms and topics which may be unfamiliar. Again, the PM advised primarily advertising a “training and employability” rather than “environmental” opportunity.

PMs were also asked to what extent, in their experience, young people were *motivated by the skills aspect* of their project offer as opposed to other factors. Common motivators for young people reported varied, including: skills and employability; the social aspect (key for young people with complex needs); and, an opportunity to “get outside more” and/or do something practical.

Initially, the environmental aspects are a *less common motivator*, except in cases where young people were specifically interested in entering environmental careers. This was linked with *known barriers to entering the environmental sector* and securing entry-level opportunities. As might be expected, employment-related motivations correlated with age (i.e., school-leavers). University students in particular were motivated to develop practical work-based experience.

Motivators for young people engaging in outdoor/environmental skills provision



Figure 4: motivating factors for young people

Structured skills provision and informal skills provision

As mentioned, projects offer a range of structured and informal skills provision. There is no definitive answer (and need not be one) on whether structured or informal support is *more effective*; rather, it is clear that *different approaches are effective for different young people*.

For example, **informal, open-ended support** was recognised as particularly important when engaging school-aged young people with complex needs, and/or those who do not thrive in a traditional educational setting. One PM described the importance of such flexibility, in order to highlight the distinction between traditional learning settings and the project environment, as well as to allow enough time for outcomes to be realised. Often, the focus with such groups of young people was on providing “quick wins”, a lot of choice, confidence-building, and activities centred on soft and practical skills. However, it should be noted that even in “informal” settings, consistency is often appreciated by participants (e.g., a regular weekly session).

Structured programmes are of varying durations, from “intensive” internships or summer schools of a few weeks to apprenticeships spanning a year or more. Longer, structured programmes in particular appeared to work well for “older” young people, such as those who are seeking to enter or re-enter employment, education, or training, as well as those seeking experience to achieve career aspirations. Often, such structured programmes have accreditation attached and enable participants to develop a range of practical and social skills - crucially, alongside work-based skills.

Relatedly, for some, the **clear end-goal of accreditation** is described as a key motivator, driving young people to gain skills they would not otherwise. On the other hand, one PM emphasised *flexibility*, stating that AQA unit awards, in particular, gave flexibility to accredit a wide range of activities. Some PMs stated they are considering uptake of unit awards, after observing the success of this approach for other projects, particularly in supporting young people with complex barriers to gain accreditation.

“Their motivation is completing the AQA – they would not do it otherwise, whereas if it’s part of achieving the award they desperately try to complete (a task) e.g., cleaning tools. That’s been really brilliant in upskilling on practical tasks.” – Project manager consultee

In both cases, whether support is structured or informal, there is a consensus that the “**non-classroom**” setting is of considerable importance to the achievement of outcomes. In addition, it is apparent that regardless of provision type, young people benefit from *consistent support or coaching* from project staff or another mentor, often one-to-one. In particular, one PM mentioned that:

“Unstructured and 1-2-1 time is extremely important in developing emotional skills and mental health. Young people have low self-esteem and confidence and feel overshadowed. You need a high adult ratio to nurture (them) through an activity. Some won’t pick up a saw unless we go off on our 1-2-1. They need 1-2-1 nurturing to get through a task.” – Project manager consultee

Other key variances in approach

Other variances in project’s approaches to skills development included:

- **Level and type of skills** - the type and level of skills a young person is suited to engage with reportedly depends on a variety of factors. For example:
 - **Low-level qualifications** may suit those with low educational attainment, complex lives, and/or additional needs, representing an accessible, self-defined route into learning.
 - **Higher-level qualifications / leadership skills**, through engaging with youth forums and panels, may suit college or university students - in some cases providing opportunities for youth leadership can develop specific, additional skills.
 - **Practical skills** support a sense of achievement and tend to be accessible (or adaptable) regardless of prior learning or existing skill level. In some cases, this type of task was reportedly attractive to males who did not enjoy a traditional classroom-setting. The skills gained were considered valuable in generating employment opportunities.
 - **Flexibility**: there is a consensus that flexibility is important, with individual learning plans recommended, catering for the specific needs and aspirations of the young person.

“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

- **Duration of involvement:**
 - **Short duration / quick wins:** as with practical skills, qualifications or projects of a short duration (i.e., 2-3 weeks) can help instill an instant sense of achievement and boost motivation. In addition, intensive, shorter programmes can quickly catalyse knowledge and reinforce learning.
 - **Longer duration:** a number of project managers described that open-ended engagement models are crucial for particular participants -often those from vulnerable groups- in order to give them time and space to achieve outcomes. It is considered important to go at a pace which feels comfortable, as well as to build confidence and self-esteem.

- **Group size and structure:** all projects relayed the benefits of young people being able to interact in group settings, which was considered essential for developing a range of social and emotional skills. Often, *small* groups were cited as particularly effective for vulnerable groups. Another model cited as effective was mixed-age groups, and/or groups involving both young adults and older community members. This was reportedly valuable in instilling appropriate behaviours, skills transferrable to the workplace, broadening young people’s social skills and interactions, and increasing buy-in and attainment. In some cases, this approach also generated positive older role models for the young people.

Resources / inputs required for successful delivery of skills development

This section considers various factors supporting skills development, as summarised in Figure 5 below.

Resources / inputs required for successful delivery of skills development

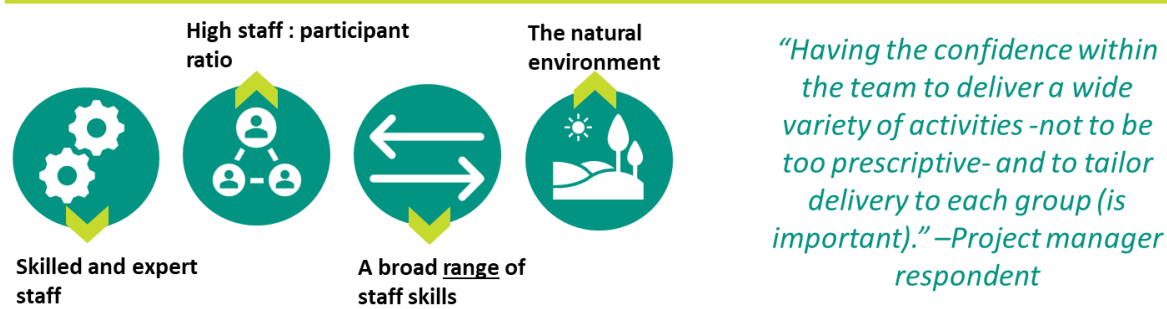


Figure 5: resources inputs required for successful delivery

When asked what resources were key in successfully delivering skills development, *staff resources and skills* were strongly emphasised by the majority of respondents. This was seen as essential for a range of reasons, most notably in creating a supportive environment for participants.

Moreover, the nature of the Programme and participants necessitates *a broad and varied range of skills in staff members* i.e., staff with skills in a combination of one or more of the following: environmental skills; youth work skills, often including expertise in supporting those with additional or complex needs; specialist skills such as construction or employability support; and training skills to support skills transfer. A number of PMs reported how participants benefitted as a result of the variety of backgrounds and professional experience of delivery staff. Further, the broad range of staff skills was seen to enable working with a similarly broad range of young people, as well as provision of a more expansive range of opportunities.

For some groups, a *high staff to participant ratio* (e.g., 1:4) was considered crucial to get the best outcomes, and to adequately support young people with complex needs and/or those exhibiting challenging behaviour. This, of course, limits the total number of participants it is possible to engage with; however, it reportedly improves *quality* of engagement and retention for those involved. This level of support was considered essential to build the confidence necessary for young people to successfully gain skills, echoing findings of the Mid-Term Evaluation Report and wider literature⁸.

Other resources mentioned included: equipment and materials for running sessions, transportation, and *the natural environment* itself as a key setting for delivery.

⁸ [Talent Match: Achievements and lessons for policy and programme design](#) (Talent Match, 2018)

Does this (what is effective) differ for different groups of young people?



PMs were asked about the ways in which they have needed to adapt their *theorised* delivery model in *practice*, to meet the specific needs of young people. Respondents were also asked whether, in their experience, different approaches suited young people with different characteristics. All projects agreed that a **tailored approach is essential**. Furthermore, offering not one single approach, but a **range of options** -as most of the projects have chosen to do- is reportedly *“a godsend because all young people have different needs”*.

- Anecdotally, **young people from disadvantaged backgrounds** entered projects with lower confidence levels. This group often required more intensive initial support to build confidence, and approaches centred on instilling a sense of achievement prior to building skills.
- A couple of PMs discussed that “younger” young people can benefit from being **mentored by “older” young people**, and further, that mentors can gain additional skills through fulfilling this responsibility (whether in a formal or informal capacity).
- One PM specified that **vulnerable young people** benefitted from being in a peer group alongside those facing similar life circumstances (those with learning difficulties, behavioural issues, or drug and alcohol addiction, for example). This reportedly aided skills development as the group members typically felt more comfortable engaging with one another.
- As mentioned, activities which build practical skills are reportedly well-suited to some **groups of young adult males**, in particular. Moreover, in one case, bushcraft sessions run with young males previously involved in knife crime encouraged safe use of tools and addressed violent behaviours.

“Where do you start giving them tools that they used as weapons and make that safe? There are approaches in managing that risk. (If you) Gave them the responsibility, and trust in them without being overbearing, they would actually do it. Bushcraft is an approach to skills development with those groups.” –Project manager consultee

- Similarly, it was reported that **those with Special Educational Needs (SEN)** “benefit hugely from practical activities” and conservation work. This can be especially true for individuals who may struggle with written work or classroom settings. One PM also relayed that practical activities such as bushcraft are a useful vehicle for building life skills (e.g. cooking or first aid).
- For **socio-economically disadvantaged groups**, provision of a paid training opportunity appeared to be a clear motivator. Moreover, this removed a number of barriers to engagement, and, in turn barriers to entry into environmental sector jobs.
- Some groups were **considered more “academic”** and/or had an existing environmental awareness. A couple of PMs considered such groups to be in a better position to approach “bigger topics” and to lead activities or projects shortly after initial engagement. For these groups, learning about environmental topics was much more self-directed according to interest. This is not to suggest that other groups are less capable of leading, or of broaching such topics; rather, it was recognised that for some young people other, more pressing needs had to be met first.

Have the approaches been informed by the wider portfolio?

In some cases, project approaches or models for developing skills have been influenced by the wider portfolio of Our Bright Future projects. Further, in some instances, the portfolio has broadened opportunities for participants to develop a wider range of skills, compared to if projects had been acting in isolation. This has included, for example:

- Wider adoption of those awards or **approaches to accreditation** which worked well for particular projects in evidencing or supporting learning (such as John Muir or AQA units);
- Uptake of Programme **youth forum or youth panel approaches** at a project or organisational level, therefore offering an opportunity to develop additional skills, including leadership skills;
- Participation in **project-to-project skills exchanges** has broadened opportunities in some cases;
- One project has **commissioned another Our Bright Future project** organisation to deliver a short course to participants on leadership; and,
- One PM reported talking to another project prior to developing additional campaigning and policy activities to gain insight around what worked well.

A couple of PMs wished to emphasise that they also sought out learning external to the Our Bright Future portfolio, and had benefited from speaking with partner organisations as well as organisations within their wider networks to inform approaches.

Q3. What are the *outcomes* of skills development?

Sub-questions:

- a) For example, how are skills being **used** and in what settings? What are the **destinations** of those gaining skills through Our Bright Future?
- b) To what **extent** are stated outcomes achieved by participants?
- c) What are the key **success factors** in achieving stated outcomes?

Headline outcomes of skills development for young people

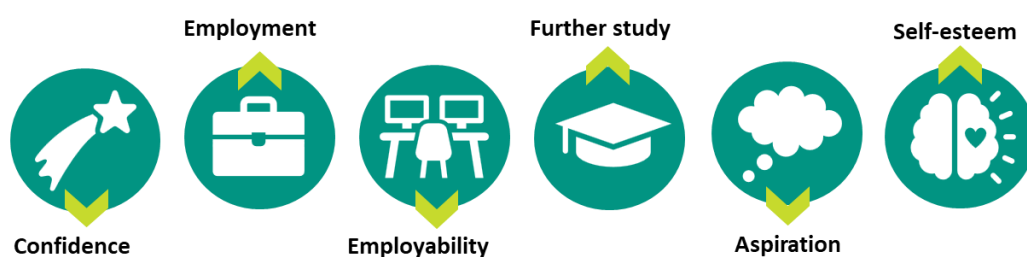


Figure 6: headlines outcomes of skills development

What are the outcomes of skills development? To what extent are stated outcomes achieved by participants?

Project managers were asked to describe the *key outcomes* for participants of the skills gained through participation in Our Bright Future, i.e., in what ways does this skills development *benefit* the young person? Supporting evidence submitted by PMs was also reviewed. Each of the projects has different target outcomes in relation to skills, which are not directly comparable or collatable, so this section instead aims to explore skills outcomes qualitatively.

Confidence

Confidence was mentioned by all respondents as a clear benefit for young people taking part in skills-based activities; however, this outcome seems to begin during the process of skills *development* (either as an indirect effect or through intentional confidence-building by project staff), and not only as a *result* of gaining the skills. Echoing findings from the Mid Term Evaluation Report, often, confidence is a *pre-requisite* to gaining skills, particularly when engaging vulnerable groups.

“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

In terms of the scale at which this outcome was observed, there was consensus that *most participants* engaging with projects, either in the medium or longer-term, gain in confidence to some degree. This progression is enabled in a range of ways, such as: a supportive approach; actively recognising achievement; having tasks suited to individual ability and preferences; generating “quick wins”; and facilitating a safe environment.

Gaining employment

The majority of PMs working with employment-age young people reported that a *proportion of them had gained employment* as a result of the skills and/or accreditations gained through involvement in Our Bright Future. This progression was observed for a range of individuals entering a range of sectors, including but not limited to environmental roles.

Firstly, it should be noted that employment progressions are not a central aim of all participating projects, and that progressions are formally tracked to varying degrees. Importantly, a parallel thematic study sought to follow-up in relation to *longer-term* alumni destinations, noting that projects are not always able to maintain direct contact with participants in order to track such outcomes.

From what is *known* about participant destinations, the scale at which this outcome was achieved varied significantly by project. The ratio of engagement to progression also varies greatly. For example, one project reported engaging with almost 1,500 young people across the project, with 319 becoming long-term volunteers, and, of those, 22 moving into training, employment or volunteering (although more evidence would be needed to establish attribution). Another project suggested that, of those who completed the programme of engagement, around half secured employment, a quarter secured internships, and a quarter did not achieve this outcome, due to persistent barriers.

Taken together, the above illustrates that achievement of employment outcomes is *time / engagement-intensive*, and requires long-term engagement with young people in the majority of cases, particularly to overcome barriers young people may face. One respondent suggested that outcomes were more swiftly achieved for young people facing fewer complex barriers.

"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.

At times, across the range of projects interviewed, progressions are recorded but the nature of roles secured is not known. Where evidence was available, employment secured by participants was often, perhaps unsurprisingly, *environmental or practical in nature*. This included roles such as: jobs with third sector environmental organisations; jobs with local councils; a project officer in an environmental organisation; habitat officer; and, trainee farm adviser. The successful appointments of Our Bright Future participants suggests that involvement in the programme, in such cases, produces trainees who are ready and adequately skilled to enter the labour market (often, with participants holding no prior accreditation or relevant experience prior to Our Bright Future).

Some projects track participant destinations more closely, as this is strongly connected with their remit. For example, one project offering apprenticeships provided records stating that the majority of apprentices from two rounds (19 in total) have stayed in employment, gained employment, or gone on to further education *as a direct result of skills and accreditations gained through the project*.

Finally, more evidence would be required, but there are also isolated, anecdotal examples of accreditations gained having impacted positively on earnings of participants.

Project example: employment outcomes

One project offered environmental apprenticeships to young people, and stated that all of those who completed the scheme had verifiably gained hard skills, and were observed to have gained soft skills in addition. From one cohort of ten apprentices, all successfully completed a [Level 2 qualification in environmental conservation](#), and [eight out of ten gained employment or continued training](#), with involvement in Our Bright Future a clear contributing factor in this progression.



Employability

Of course, not all participants experience an outcome of gaining jobs, and indeed, not all may wish to pursue employment or are at an appropriate age or stage to do so. There are, however, some indications that participation in Our Bright Future projects [supports employability](#) more broadly. Employability is about being “ready” for work. Improving employability may involve developing, for example, the skills, attributes, confidence, and attitudes needed to gain or perform well in a job.

In considering this, the literature review findings illustrate it is widely regarded as challenging to establish a clear causal link between various youth provisions or volunteering to employability. In contrast, some of the supporting evidence submitted by Our Bright Future projects -including testimony from parents, caregivers and teachers- indicates that the types of experiences gained are of direct value to young people in pursuing future employment or career goals. Primarily, such comments related to the fact that the experiences, skills, accreditations gained, and attributes developed through participation provide [“something to talk about in their university applications”](#) and job applications. Importantly, these were often considered to be experiences that the young people [would have not been able to access or demonstrate in the absence of the programme](#).

Given various factors relevant to work readiness, including skills as well as social, emotional, and personal attributes and competencies, it is fair to say that Our Bright Future has contributed to employability of young people in some cases.

Further study

There is a wealth of anecdotal evidence that a proportion of participants progress to further education or study as a result of engagement. In some cases, such progressions are recorded by projects; however, some figures lack specificity, stating that participants went on to further education, training, or employment. For example, one project specified that 30-40% of participants progressed to “further education, volunteering in the sector, or employment” following participation. It should be noted that various factors may have affected this proportion, including the age of young people taking part, the project’s ability to follow-up with participants, and the timing of data collection.

Where topics pursued are recorded, it appears that the majority of participants have gone on to an environmentally focussed or environmentally adjacent opportunity, such as farming, animal care, or conservation, for example. Some have accessed a higher-level qualification or apprenticeship, showing [continued progression post-programme](#).

There are isolated examples where participation has [influenced](#) the study destinations of young people; however, this topic area is more thoroughly investigated as part of the parallel alumni thematic study.

Improved aspirations and self-esteem

Linked to, but distinct from confidence, one outcome reported by a number of PMs was *increased aspiration and self-esteem*. This involved opening young people up to possibilities they may not have previously considered for themselves and their future. One PM related, for example, that their project had broadened aspirations through *countering gender stereotypes*, including facilitating girls to work with power tools and boys to develop cooking and baking skills. Another PM mentioned that aspiration-building was especially important in connection to *environmental career pathways*, as young people are often passionate about the issues, yet are unaware “*they can have a future in it*”.

“Aspiration is important for us. Big issue in (region’s) schools. Young people in year six are performing well and by year 11 they are not. Something happens in secondary schools, in part due to aspiration. Aspiration matters a lot. After taking part they see college as an option at the end.” – Project manager respondent

Wider benefits

Other benefits for young people which were mentioned by PMs included:

- **Social benefits and making new friends** as a result of improved social skills / the ability to interact with others in a group setting. One project estimated that around half of participants achieve the outcome of becoming more sociable and confident, though it is difficult to isolate this being as a result of *skills* activity specifically.
- **Improved health and wellbeing** was mentioned by a couple of PMs as a *result* of gaining skills, but also as a *pre-cursor* to them gaining skills. However, this type of gain was more often connected specifically to the setting for delivering skills, i.e., the outdoor environment.
- **Environmental awareness and appreciation** due to developing skills in the natural environment was mentioned by a few PMs. Example testimonials -from supporting evidence- included caring more for animals and insects and desiring to spend more time outdoors, for example. It was also clear that some young people gained *enjoyment* from this nature connection or interest.

Many stories of outcomes being achieved are **individual and indicative**, and, overall, it is challenging to establish the *scale* of outcomes and to what extent they are *typically* achieved by participants. Having said this, typically, outcomes are not approached or experienced in isolation, and young people have tailored engagement journeys. It is therefore useful to *consider outcomes more holistically* – especially as many of the projects focus on supporting young people in a holistic manner. Thus, whilst some outcomes are more easily measured, counted and observed, outcomes achieved range widely according to where young people begin their personal journey, and what they hope to get out of their participation. Considering outcomes holistically can generate *impactful personal stories*.

“Furthermore, she will frequently support others who struggle with taking part in the activities, readily sharing the knowledge and skills learnt in this time (on the project). Consequently, she is aspiring to a career working in the outdoors and has asked to support the regular school holiday activities run by >the organisation< to get some work experience, successfully attending her first volunteer role in February half term” –Supporting evidence, testimony

It is clear that young people benefit differently from participation in projects, develop at different rates and in different ways, with the **duration of support** considered an important factor in allowing a broader range of young people –particularly those experiencing disadvantage- to secure outcomes.

Undoubtedly, there is more to learn about the *longer-term effects of participation* as well as *sustainability of outcomes* (the parallel alumni thematic study sought to gather evidence against these criteria), though there are, at this stage, anecdotal examples which suggest that, on an individual level, the outcomes and change created via participation in skills development through Our Bright Future projects can be considerable for those involved. An illustrative quote is detailed below.

“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

Further, in pursuit of a more holistic perspective, PMs were asked whether there were particular skills which young people typically *valued most*, or which allowed them to achieve the *greatest benefit*.

There were mixed perspectives on whether soft skills or accredited skills were valued more by participants. For example, one PM cited soft skills as the “top trump”, explaining that the young people they engaged did not respond well to formal education and therefore did not appreciate the value of accreditation. Responses from a few PMs suggested that when the value of accreditations is more *clearly linked with the value to a potential employer*, some young people more clearly see the benefit of it.

Relatedly, helping young people to *recognise and value their own skills and progression* is seen as important, as they may not always realise the ways in which they have developed over the course of a project. A number of projects have implemented ways to support young people to recognise and reflect on their skills, and in particular, supporting individuals to frame and speak about their skills in a way that will appeal to employers. This type of support has included peer-to-peer sharing sessions, regular 1-2-1s with project staff, filling out progress trackers, and being supported to develop CVs in various formats, including visual CVs.

How are skills being applied and in what settings?

One example explored in the literature review was that work placements, offered to 14-15-year-olds within the education sector, reportedly developed pupils’ confidence in their abilities. When attempting to isolate the success factor, Messer argued this change occurred because pupils were able to observe themselves *applying and developing skills in a real-world environment*.

Relatedly, even for Our Bright Future projects not linked with work placements, many of the activities are practical and carried out in “real-world” settings. Moreover, after gaining skills, it is clear that students are able to *(re)apply them* in various settings. This can include, for example, applying skills through further involvement in-project, teaching or sharing skills with others, applying project learning in school or other non-project environments, and/or in further training or employment.

A number of PMs recounted that during the project, young people have had the opportunity to apply and re-apply skills gained, and to *build-on and regularly reuse them*. In some cases, projects have *retained individuals for 3 to 4 years duration*, particularly where participants are school-aged. This means they have been able to develop and use skills consistently; for example, in wildlife gardens, or on nature reserves; for example, maintaining woodland.

For some young people, once they have been with the project for a while, they begin to share their skills and experience with other young people as a mentor -formally or informally- and/or take on leadership roles connected with events, campaigning, or youth panels and forums.

Although there was consensus that both hard and soft skills developed within the projects are *highly transferrable to a range of settings* external to the project, often, PMs related that there was a gap in understanding how skills are applied outside of the project. This is for a range of reasons, from lack of access to alternate settings (e.g., often schools are not able to share data), and/or a lack of resource or ability to follow-up with participants post-project. Broadly, this affects understanding of *longer-term* skills outcomes. The next section therefore sets out findings from an e-survey -conducted primarily as part of the alumni thematic study- which provided insights on use and application of skills.

“They’re with us for such a short period of time, we don’t really know what they’re doing outside / after the project. We get the short-term – see them growing, thriving and gaining skills in an eight-week period.” – Project manager respondent

Participants’ application of knowledge and skills gained through Our Bright Future

When asked if the knowledge and skills gained through Our Bright Future had been useful outside of their project, 80% of respondents reported already using them (base:257). Examining these results by age group, perhaps unsurprisingly, this result was positively correlated with age. 89% of 16–18-year-olds indicated that they had already used the skills or knowledge gained compared to 63% under 16s⁹.

The results for participants of different activity types were similar, though a slightly greater proportion (89%) of those participating in apprenticeships indicated they had applied the skills gained through Our Bright Future outside of their project compared to other activities: outdoor practical environment tasks (79%); work experience or placement (82%); entrepreneurial activities (84%); and campaigning (84%). A greater proportion of respondents who reported engaging in the long-term¹⁰ indicated they had already used their skills (82%) compared to those engaged in the short-term (71%).

Figure 7 below shows exactly how respondents indicated they had applied their skills or knowledge.

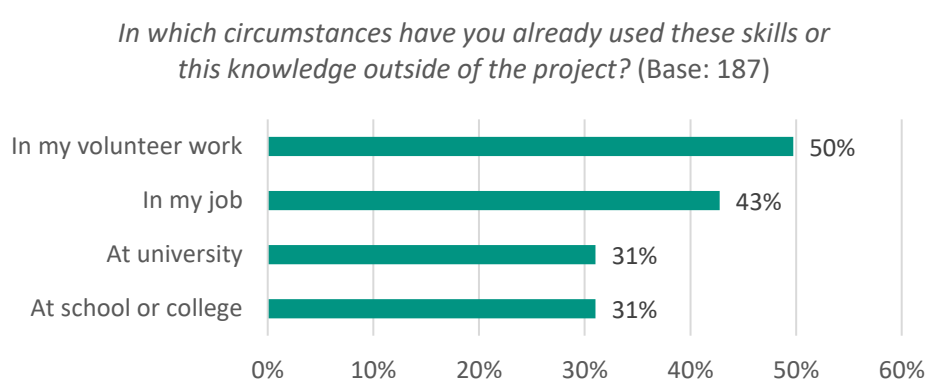


Figure 7: Alumni application of skills and knowledge outside Our Bright Future.

⁹ 73% of those aged 19-21 and 83% of those aged 22-29 indicated they had already used the skills they gained through Our Bright Future outside of their project.

¹⁰ Long-term: participated for a period of three months or more, Short-term: participated more than once over the course of up to three months.

When asked to provide examples of this, respondents described applying both environmental and transferable skills in their roles, within and outside of the environment sector. Individual examples provided by respondents included applying project-gained skills in a Phase 1 Habitat Survey; guiding young people in practical activities; delivering workshops to schools and community groups on reducing and recycling waste; and implementing new environmental practices on a farm.

Examples of Our Bright Future alumni applying skills in non-project settings



Figure 8: Application of skills in non-project settings

Interestingly, respondents frequently referenced applying the *confidence* they gained through projects in their subsequent roles. For example, the majority who provided qualitative comments discussed struggling with anxiety and/or limited confidence prior to joining the programme, and having improved this through participation. This new-found confidence was applied in various situations from *"all the time, every day"* to delivering speeches at protests or *"teaching to a room full of people"*. It is useful to note that confidence is closely linked with the development of skills and knowledge and, in some cases, represents a prerequisite to applying as well as developing them.

What are the success factors in achieving skills outcomes?

The literature and evidence reviewed collectively supports the conclusion that there is "no difference between those doing meaningful social action and those participating in structured programmes..." in terms of the benefits that can be gained¹¹. This is positive in that a range of approaches appear effective, and a range of options can be made available to meet specific needs. However, in order to understand what made change happen *most often*, or to the *greatest degree* for participants through the projects interviewed, PMs were asked to consider the *"key success factors"* in achieving skills development and outcomes.

¹¹ National Youth Social Action Survey (2015 and 2016).

A number of approaches considered effective in **developing** skills have been outlined **previously**. Key success factors in achieving skills **outcomes** are summarised below. These broadly overlap.

- **The experience of staff delivering:** having **experienced** staff to enthuse, involve, and support young people reportedly “makes a massive difference”. It was noted that retaining experienced staff can be challenging, and finding staff with a niche combination of knowledge (or willingness to learn) can be challenging. *“The springboard for participants to achieve wouldn’t work without facilitators”.*
- **Staff to participant ratio:** a couple of PMs noted that when their staff to participant ratio dropped, the quality of the experience and level of outcomes attained also dropped, across a range of activity types. For example, tasks were taking longer, behaviours deteriorated, and engagement dropped. This necessitates an investment of the project in staff costs.
- **A longer duration of support,** facilitated by the length of the Programme, was cited as important. This provided young people time to observe initial outcomes, or to build additional outcomes. For example, an external evaluation report for one project emphasised that the longer-term approach was *“generating better outcomes”* for participants. The report stated that some participants (school-aged with mental health issues) have attended the groups for two to three years and were only now starting to trust the project officers, leading to improved outcomes. In contrast, some projects found a more *“time-intensive” approach* allowed participants to develop skills more quickly. As an example, one project chose to deliver an intensive internship with daily activity, finding this accelerated learning compared to a weekly volunteering session of a couple of hours duration.
- **Project exchanges broaden skills:** being part of the Our Bright Future portfolio had enabled “skills exchanges” in certain cases, meaning that the range of opportunities available to young people to develop skills is increased. For example, this included young people studying for a forestry qualification undertaking a visit to another project location, which reportedly added additional skills due to the differences in habitats.
- **Flexibility:** as touched upon already, flexibility is considered key to respond to participant needs and preferences: *“The flexibility of the approach (is) the most important thing and funding allowed us to be as flexible as we have been. We thought young people would take the same journey but soon realised that wasn’t going to work, and had to change our approach to work with them.”-Project manager respondent*
- **Removing barriers to participation** including: logistics and access for participants, such as free transportation, particularly in rural areas; and, provision of paid internships, essential for those who could not afford to undertake unpaid training.

A number of these themes align with findings from the wider literature. For example, studies identified components across structured and informal programmes that appear to encourage skill development. This includes *strong relationships with adults running the provision*, clear roles for young people, and *training that gets young people working in teams*¹². Unusually, group work was not typically mentioned as a “success factor” by projects, despite this routinely being mentioned in relation to generating soft skills development and being an effective and commonly used model.

¹² [National Alliance for Secondary Education and Transition, Youth Development and Youth Leadership.](#)

In addition, in contrast to the literature review, which highlighted that youth social action and accreditation programmes focus heavily on skills development and ‘churning out accredited graduates’¹³, or which risk becoming “a set of non-discursive, practical activities, which can leave the value of young people’s voices side-lined”, the *highly tailored and participant-centred approach* of Our Bright Future seems to counter this assertion.

¹³ McKenna and Edwards (2016); Tania de St Croix (2017).

Q4. Are there particular benefits to developing skills (specifically soft skills) through experiences and volunteering in natural environments?

Sub-question:

d) *Are there any benefits to learning outside and through practical experiences? If so, which young people benefit most from this learning environment?*

Firstly, it is worth noting the proportion of projects involved in the study which deliver outdoor activities as a *key component* of their offer. Six of the seven projects who responded to the specific question stated delivery of outdoor activity as core. One of those six also offered classroom-based elements as a key component of delivery. The remaining project primarily delivered a classroom-based approach, focussed on engaging school pupils in classroom-based activity.

Outdoor delivery was clearly one of the preferred vehicles for delivering skills amongst those projects which responded, although *limitations and barriers* were also noted, such as practicalities and weather, and the preferences of participants. One project is known to have readdressed its focus on outdoor versus indoor activities at the behest of participants, with facilitated indoor sessions reportedly yielding positive responses. This reportedly required some initial adaptation and development of project staff skills in order to lead more effectively within a classroom setting.

Are there particular benefits to developing skills (specifically soft skills) through experiences and volunteering in natural environments?

Revisiting the literature review, it is claimed that the development of soft skills, through youth programmes and leadership experiences, subsequently improves academic performance and engagement in education¹⁴. Non-formal awards are also considered an effective way of reintroducing young people to education and increasing their motivation to learn¹⁵. Students have expressed that undertaking work experience and placements helped them to understand the importance of doing well at school¹⁶.

The literature review included evidence providing some indication that social action has a positive effect on young people, regardless of whether interventions have an environmental focus. As part of this study, an attempt was made to isolate / investigate the *outdoor component of skills delivery* and learning, in order to understand whether this feature of the programme was a *causal factor or contributing factor* in relation to the **types** of outcomes achieved, or the **extent** of outcomes achieved.

In relation to skills, it is evident that the development of the majority of practical environmental and conservation skills is dependent on a participatory “learn by doing” approach, with participants undertaking activities that simply would not be possible in an indoor or classroom-setting. Whilst some elements of learning may be possible through a theoretical approach, it is clear that the *application of skills* is dependent on the outdoor environment; for example, in order to learn safe use of equipment, and/or to be operating within the relevant habitat to exercise such skills. As an indication, learning coppicing, handling strimmers, or undertaking nature surveys would be hard to replicate effectively without a direct and experiential element in the target environment.

¹⁴ [National Alliance for Secondary Education and Transition](#); [Birdwell et al \(2013\)](#); [Barry et al \(2018\)](#).

¹⁵ NYA (2010)

¹⁶ Messer (2017)

Relatedly, a number of interviewees cited that “all” of the skills developed by their respective projects were developed in an outdoor environment; in particular the practical element, but soft skills in addition. One PM, responsible for delivering to groups with additional needs and/or from disadvantaged groups, also noted the life skills developed through getting outside and into nature, such as learning how to dress to protect oneself from the elements. It is clear then, that a range of skills can be developed outdoors, some of which appear contingent upon *being outdoors specifically*.

From PM interviews, it is clear that practical tasks provide a key contribution to participant *motivation and sense of achievement*, due to the fact that results from such tasks are visible and progress is often immediately measurable. A number of respondents commented that the link between effort and reward is important, stating that this sense of achievement also helps boost self-esteem. This echoes findings of the Mid Term Evaluation Report.

“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

It was also considered by one PM that practical tasks are of particular benefit to boys who may have struggled academically and/or with behaviour issues, due to the self-esteem resulting from them being able to display practical or physical strengths.

Also, there is evidence, both anecdotal and recorded by projects’ evaluation activities, that young people feel *mental health benefits from being outside*; for example, with young people stating that they feel “free” and “refreshed” and “calm”. A number of PMs related that the outdoor environment is considered relaxing to participants, particularly those with high-level needs. To link this to skills gains, one PM posited that this relaxed setting creates *a positive and receptive environment for learning*, as well as being “*distraction-free*” - most typically taken to indicate stepping away from screens, and other distractions of that nature. Supporting this theme, there were also testimonies stating that young people, as a result of feeling more relaxed (and in part from being tired out by physical tasks), had slept better and therefore had more energy to engage with activities.

One longitudinal study carried out by a project highlighted an interesting point around **sustaining the benefits** of these types of gains across longer-term engagement. For the particular group of study participants, one individual -who had previously noted the ways in which outdoor work, in particular use of tools had allowed him to vent his anger safely and feel calmer- had begun to realise *diminishing effects* after a couple of years of involvement.

On the flip side, one PM cited that hosting young people in the outdoors can be challenging since the “*natural environment is not their natural environment*”. This is primarily considered to be the case for participants from inner city environments and/or socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Such groups were less likely to have had the opportunity for regular visits to outdoor settings prior to engagement in the project, meaning such locations were unfamiliar. However, the same PM also commented that, sometimes, this “disruption” can be helpful, as the new environment allows for challenging behaviours to be interrupted safely by project staff “before the bravado comes back”.

Benefits of outdoor delivery of skills provision



Figure 9: benefits of outdoor delivery of skills provision

Are there any benefits to learning outside and through practical experiences? If so, which young people benefit most from this learning environment?

This section specifically considers improvement in participants' *ability to learn and educational attainment* as a result of participation in outdoor activities. This is primarily relevant for considering outcomes for school-aged children, though also for young adults who may be seeking to pursue educational outcomes, and/or develop learning capability as a transferrable skill.

Research set out in the literature review indicates the ways in which environmental interventions can improve *physical and mental well-being* and the overall development of young people. For example; feeling happier, having more energy, improved engagement in learning¹⁷, improved behaviour, as well as increased educational attainment. According to the literature, this type of outcome is often more pronounced for school-aged young people, and particularly vulnerable pupils¹⁸. Other benefits from engaging with nature including mental health and wellbeing benefits, such as “feeling calm” and “having headspace”.

Often, evaluative data does not isolate the specific factor/(s) contributing to these outcomes (i.e., it is not noted whether outcomes are as an effect of group-work; of the staff member; or, specifically as a result of nature engagement, or a combination, for example). Evidence in the literature gathered from teachers, however, does suggest specific outcomes for learning specifically attributable to the setting, such as helping pupils develop knowledge and beliefs about the environment¹⁹.

Evidence from PM interviews as well as submitted supporting evidence has been synthesised and presented below to explore whether the outdoor setting of many Our Bright Future activities has affected participants' learning outcomes, and in what ways.

First of all, a few comments suggest that the natural environment makes young people more receptive to learning, and enables them to better “*open up to new ideas and try new things*”. For example, one PM was keen to posit that learning in the outdoors aids teaching of more academically focussed topics, due enhancing the learners' concentration, learning and memory. Another suggested that the removal of “physical barriers” creates a more positive learning environment. Of course, limitations were discussed, such as the practicalities of travel, weather considerations, and the group dynamics.

¹⁷ [Prisk C and Cusworth H, Muddy Hands \(March 2018\).](#)

¹⁸ [Institute of Outdoor Learning citing Dudman et al \(2019\).](#)

¹⁹ [Dillon et al, The Final Report of the Outdoor Classroom in a Rural Context Action Research Project \(2003\).](#)

Of relevance, one PM pointed out that this effect may not be **unique** to the natural environment, and that another non-school or non-home setting may also deliver similar benefits, i.e., positing that the *change* of environment is the causal factor. Moreover, there are a range of success factors considered to have supported achievement of relevant outcomes. Except where there are focussed studies commissioned by projects, current data capture mechanisms are not necessarily set-up to capture or isolate the benefits of this specific aspect of delivery; especially as many of the benefits, such as being driven to spend time outdoors more often, either occur outside of the project setting, or are “unintended benefits”. Where **attribution** is less clear, we can talk about the particular **contribution** outdoor settings make and the known effects for participants.

As an example, it is clear the effects are felt differentially, with *the setting better suited to some groups more than others*. A number of PMs were clear that the natural and outdoor setting tends to be more effective / transformative for learners who find classroom-based or more formal learning environments challenging, for whatever reasons. This is supported by the literature review, which found that well-being improved amongst young people who joined National Citizen Service programmes with challenging behaviour or lower initial well-being. One such positive effect for this group as part of Our Bright Future appeared to be the influence of the setting upon behaviours and well-being (often closely linked), explored in further detail below.

Supporting evidence submitted by one project investigated outcomes for those who had little prior opportunity to interact within natural settings, through testimony from teachers, parents and caregivers, as well as delivery staff. One teacher shared how access to activities (including woodland sessions and fruit-picking) would not typically have been available, stating this not only provided *practical skills, qualifications, and work experience*, but also that being in nature led to improved *wellbeing*. For the same project, other testimonies explored how individual pupils had decreased the number of detentions gained (thought to be attributable to involvement in the project), as well as having demonstrated improved behaviour in the close aftermath of sessions outdoors.

In trying to understand this further, one PM related that: “being outside changes people behaviours”. The same respondent posited that young people who have had bad experiences in school or home settings associate being inside with being “trapped”, and that, conversely, being outdoors has a calming effect, leading to improved behaviours. Another PM emphasised that such positive behaviours in turn supports achievement of target outcomes.

Where accounts or quotes were available direct from young people, as part of supporting evidence submitted, there were statements to corroborate this effect; for example, *“I love feeling the wind in my face- it clears away all the bad things in my head and fills it with nice things.”* and *“I’m happier when I am outside than inside. I feel I belong outside. I feel calmer.”* There is further anecdotal and self-reported evidence of young people having gained mental health and behavioural benefits, such as reduced rage and anxiety, and supporting participants to manage, for example, ASD meltdowns more effectively (sometimes within the setting only, and sometimes with benefits extending outside of sessions).

Representing the most in-depth piece of evidence focussed towards this research theme, one longitudinal study commissioned by an Our Bright Future project has followed the development of a group of boys throughout the years of their involvement, and tracked factors such as confidence and self-esteem. The study cites that the biggest impact outdoor learning has had on the boys was on their *social and emotional learning* and *psychological needs*.

Whilst participating in project activities, the outdoor experiences reportedly had a positive effect in relation to the participants feeling more relaxed and less stressed compared to operating within a classroom environment, better co-operating with others, better managing their feelings and building resilience, as well as growing their confidence and self-esteem. These developments were largely self-reported, with partial attribution given to the project.

Other gains, when back in classroom settings, included receiving fewer detentions, and ability to link learning on the project to subjects across the curriculum in small ways. The study highlights that one boy felt his behaviour in school had deteriorated since his time on the Our Bright Future project had come to a close, and that he was experiencing meltdowns more frequently. This was attributed to the confined space of the classroom and being unable to chat with peers, unlike on the project.

Additionally, the cognitive effects of outdoor learning were explored by the study to an extent, through asking the participants to recall things they had learned. Whilst the participants were not able to recall details such as species of trees, the research posits that the individuals *“retained sharp memories of a sense of place and space in their minds”*. This -the report suggests- demonstrates *“a bonding of the affective and cognitive domains”*, creating more meaningful learning as a result.

Broadly, across all projects involved in the study, it is difficult to separate the effect of the natural environment from the effect of group-work, especially as all of the projects deliver a group-work approach. The ability for young people to engage with peer groups who were like-minded / facing similar challenges was also cited often in relation to gains in skills – especially soft skills.

In relation to any *negative* consequences on behaviour, limitations of the outdoor learning environment were also discussed, such as the weather, and the dynamic of the group. For some groups, the removal of physical barriers was considered to be *detrimental* to behaviour and learning. This resulted from participants becoming less conscious of rules and consequences applicable to the new setting, due to a feeling of “freedom”. Supporting evidence confirmed instances of this, with some participants “acting-out” as a result of perceiving fewer constraints in an outdoor environment. In some cases, this was overcome when rules were explained, reiterated, and enforced.

Wider outcomes relevant to outdoor settings

“(One participant) has major anxiety issues. His world has slowly been closing down around him and the John Muir award has opened it right back up. He has visited many different locations and it has been wonderful to see the restraints of modern-day life causing anxiety disappear.” Supporting evidence submitted by project manager – testimony from a teacher

“Their involvement in the project has given them an outlook to try more things, and throw themselves into outdoor activities wherever they can.” Supporting evidence submitted by project manager – testimony from a teacher

In terms of wider outcomes of engaging with a range of natural settings that they otherwise may not have had opportunity to interact with, a number of themes emerged, apparent to varying extents. These are summarised in the bullet points overleaf.

- **Greater appreciation for nature**, including, in some cases, developing greater care for animals, or developing positive environmental behaviours (explored more fully in the parallel alumni study);
- Reports from parents of young people, as well as project officers, stating that young people were **enjoying being outside** more and developing more **confidence and skills to engage with natural settings**;
- An **increased desire for future participation** and interaction with the environment and/or outdoor activities, sometimes organising trips independently of project participation, and, importantly, having the skills to do so;
- The value of **new experiences** and broadening horizons; and, finally,
- Where teachers and educators were involved in sessions delivered outdoors, one project reported that this resulted in those **teachers and educators developing new skills** and in more actively considering how to implement outdoor learning in other settings.

Project example: the apple project

Supporting evidence submitted from one of the projects revealed that one training programme has achieved wider outcomes in addition to those attained for the young people involved. This began with a gleaning project, including recovering surplus apples from orchards (dubbed “the Apple Project”).



The college which the participants attended have since adapted their Foundation Studies Curriculum so that the Apple project is integrated throughout, supporting numeracy and literacy skills development, and increasing the number of students at the college undertaking a related food hygiene qualification. In addition, the college has developed a unit around sustainability, and may introduce further units on food waste and gleaning.

The project developed an associated AQA award on apple harvesting and juice production which will be used both onsite, in the orchard and in the college. *“The students are learning how to assess health and safety issues, manage production processes and stock rotation, as well as developing entrepreneurial skills such as branding, label design and graphics and the use of media for business purposes.”*

Additionally, a link has been established with a cider company, and possibilities of linking with their in-house orchard apprenticeship scheme are being investigated. This case story demonstrates that a range of skills can be taught via the vehicle of outdoor learning and environmental issues.

5. CONCLUSIONS

This chapter seeks to draw together main conclusions from this study, particularly noting considerations for future delivery of similar programmes.

Q1. What skills have been gained by participants volunteering and engaging in the natural environment through Our Bright Future?

The projects that comprise the Our Bright Future programme support young people to develop an impressive array of skills, 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 which are united in their aim to support young people to fulfil their potential through safeguarding and enhancing the natural environment. Furthermore, the diversity *within* projects reflects the flexibility of the offer to young people, with one project having provided around 40 different courses and some projects having developed bespoke accreditations or awards to meet the needs of participants.

Table 5.1 Summary of key skills gained by participants (unprompted question to project managers)		
Type of skill	Example skills gained	Example approaches
Practical (including practical environmental tasks)	- Horticultural skills e.g., planting, tackling invasive species, gardening, coppicing - Environmental surveying and monitoring - Habitat creation and management - Tool use e.g., saws, drills, knives - Farming skills e.g., planting, animal care, farm labour - Use of equipment e.g., stoves - Survival skills e.g., fire lighting, shelter-building, cooking skills - Construction skills	- Outdoor, practical activities and conservation tasks - Volunteering placements - Training opportunities - Accredited and non-accredited qualifications - Informal engagement
Social, emotional and personal skills	- Social skills e.g., team-working, ability to form friendships, increased empathy - Self-confidence and self-esteem - Mental health / personal awareness / emotional and behavioural self-management	- Group work with peers and/or communities - Practical outdoor activities - Time in nature
Environmental skills	- Academic skills and knowledge - Environmental campaigning - Environmental awareness	- School / college-based activities - Campaigning activities - Internships
Work-based skills	- Improved attitude towards work - Professional skills - Communication and interpersonal skills - Planning events / projects - Public speaking - Time management and organisation - Presentation skills - Leadership and mentoring skills	- Structured programmes, traineeships and work placements - Accredited and non-accredited qualifications - Campaigning and events - Youth panels - Youth-led activities and peer-mentoring approaches

The majority of projects with a focus on skills (i.e., the scope of this thematic study) offered accreditation and/or awards, either as a route to developing skills or verifying skills gained, using a range of models and formats. 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.

Feedback from project managers suggests that between 75 % and all young people who completed a programme of activity have developed skills. It is evidently *easier* to demonstrate and track success in practical skills development and development via formal programmes, than softer skills of young people engaged on a more informal basis. Practical training within Our Bright Future Projects covered a host of skills including plant care, use of hand tools and gardening equipment, safe use of pesticides and outdoor first aid.

Project managers highlighted that *interpersonal and social skills* are developed by participants to some extent across all activity types. The prevalence of this type of skills development is linked to the frequent use of group activities across projects. Interestingly, the *effective* development of these skills, such as interpersonal skills and self-management of emotions and behaviours, is dependent on the *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 ability to engage socially (such as ASD or ADHD). Evidence seems to suggest that the non-classroom setting contributes to positive outcomes.

Alongside inter-personal behaviours, capabilities linked to effective performance in a workplace such as problem-solving, planning, written verbal skills have also been developed.

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. This mirrors the finding within the literature review that recognition, via certification and awards, is valuable. The range of qualifications offered by projects includes AQA units, apprenticeships, and City & Guilds awards, as well as John Muir and Duke of Edinburgh. Interestingly, the Economic and Social Research Council (ERSC) identified that there are few opportunities for young people to gain accreditations through voluntary conservation work. This may indicate that Our Bright Future is relatively unique within the landscape of provision.

Project managers reported that equivalent opportunities of *equal duration* and to such a *bespoke level*, would not have been available without Our Bright Future. This was considered particularly key amidst prolonged, national-scale cuts to youth provision, and a perceived focus of other relevant, accredited provision towards adult learners. Furthermore, project managers noted that it was rare that young people were involved in adjacent initiatives at the same time as having been involved with Our Bright Future, and many were not engaged in any other employment, education, training, or were in school but not accessing any other extra-curricular opportunities.

Q2. Which approaches / models / settings for delivering skills are most effective?

Projects have formulated 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”. Some projects have a single distinct skills strand whilst others have skills development embedded across delivery. For some it is a core and stated aim, whilst for others it is more implicit.

The list below provides an overview of delivery models and approaches to skills development across the programme.

- Work-based training
- Certificated practical training and enterprise training
- Events
- Practical conservation work
- Young Ranger schemes
- Mentorship schemes
- Environmental based activities in secondary schools
- Youth forums and summits
- Local and community based environmental projects
- John Muir awards
- Structured skills programmes
- Informal and responsive provision
- Campaigning activity
- Residentials
- Courses for volunteers
- Apprenticeships
- Traineeships, of flexible duration (minimum 4 weeks, generally 3 to 6 months)
- Bespoke, flexible outdoor activities led by young people's preferences
- Internships linked with clear skills objectives

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.

By way of example, *young people from disadvantaged backgrounds* can join projects with low confidence levels, affecting attainment of skills. This group often required more intensive support to build confidence, and approaches centred on instilling a sense of achievement, prior to building skills. Further, paid training opportunities reportedly remove financial barriers to skills development for those from socio-economically disadvantaged groups.

Vulnerable young people experiencing similar issues to one another (e.g., learning difficulties, behavioural issues, drug and alcohol addiction) benefit from being in an appropriate peer group. This reportedly aided skills development as they typically felt more comfortable engaging with one another. Also, young people with *special educational needs (SEN)* can “benefit hugely from practical activities” and conservation work.

The approach to skills development that is adopted is clearly *linked to engagement*, attracting different young people in different delivery contexts. Young people have different *motivators* 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 activities.

Evidence confirms that neither *structured nor informal support* are more effective than the other; rather different approaches are effective for different young people. In general, school aged young people with complex needs benefit from more flexible, open-ended provision. One project intentionally shifted focus away from qualifications to emphasise the distinction between their project and a school setting and noted 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. Longer, more structured programmes, with accreditation attached, have enabled participants to develop practical and social skills, as well as important work-based skills.

Whether support is structured or informal, there is a consensus that the “non-classroom” setting is of considerable importance to the achievement of outcomes. In addition, it is apparent that both those attending informal and structured provision benefit from *consistent support or coaching* from project staff or another mentor. This point is further supported by the importance placed on staff competencies and their ability to create a supportive environment for participants, and high staff to participant ratios.

Relatedly, the *role of project staff* should not be underestimated. Often, they need a combination of environmental skills, youth work skills, and sometimes other specialist skills such as construction or employability support, as well as experience delivering training and/or specialist skills in working with those with complex needs.

Q3. What are the outcomes of skills development?

A whole range of outcomes have been achieved by young people as a result of skills development. The most reported outcome was *gains in confidence*. This appears to begin during the development of skills and not only as a result of the new skills themselves. In terms of scale, most participants engaging in the short or long-term appear to gain confidence to some degree.

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.

Full data sets on progressions are limited. One project reported 1.5% of engaged participants progressing into employment, training, or volunteering, whilst another reported 43% progressing into employment. These figures do not consider the attribution of this outcome to Our Bright Future. The variance and sparsity of data once again reflects the diversity of the Our Bright Future programme and the extent to which employment is a project goal.

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.

Evidence suggests that Our Bright Future activities and accreditations provide verification and examples of practical application of skills, providing participants with “*something to talk about in their university applications*” and job applications. Importantly, these were often considered to be experiences that the young people would not have been able to access or demonstrate in the absence of the programme.

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.

It is extremely challenging to attach a scale to these wider outcomes. However, there is an abundance of positive stories and testimony about what is typically achieved by participants. Typically, the outcomes are not approached or achieved in isolation, and it is therefore useful to consider outcomes more holistically. Indeed, once considered **holistically**, many individual participants have unique, impactful stories about their personal journey with Our Bright Future.

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 to remove barriers to participation.

Q4. Are there particular benefits to developing skills (specifically soft skills) through experiences and volunteering in natural environments?

When considering this research question, it is useful to note that 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 project 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, 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.

Evidence collated via this study supports the view that young people feel **mental health benefits** from being outside. Young people stated that they feel “refreshed” and “calm”. A project manager noted that a relaxed setting creates a positive and receptive environment for learning, thus aiding the achievement of skills outcomes. Furthermore, there is evidence of well-being and behavioural benefits; for example, experiencing meltdowns less frequently or receiving fewer detentions. This reflects evidence from a longitudinal study which suggests that the greatest benefits for participants of outdoor learning were gains in social and emotional learning and psychological needs.

Skills development in the outdoors is not without **challenges**. These can be practical or logistical in nature, e.g., weather considerations, but can also extend to effects on the behaviour of participants. For some participants 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. Project managers noted that the natural outdoor setting was more transformative for learners who find classroom-based or more formal learning environments challenging.

Alongside skills, the 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.

Final conclusions

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 means 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 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.

APPENDIX A: METHODOLOGY

This appendix summarises the methodology for the skills thematic study. It proceeds by briefly setting out the approach to: the literature review; primary research; and, evidence and data analysis. This covers the key components carried out to respond to the research questions, outlined in [Chapter One](#).

Literature Review

As a first task in the thematic study a literature review was completed. A similar review was conducted for the Baseline Evaluation of Our Bright Future in 2016. Therefore, the scope of this literature search was specifically to yield relatively recent literature.

The literature review is presented in [Appendix B](#) and sought to scope the thematic study, in particular defining key terms and setting out a brief understanding of current knowledge related to youth and environmental skills provision. Further, another focus of the review was to understand what is already known about skills development through youth and environmental initiatives, and to identify gaps in knowledge. This informed the methodology and research tools for the primary research elements of the study, and subsequently, aided analysis of the research findings.

Closely linked with the research questions for the study, the review focused on the key themes below, with well-being as a cross-cutting theme.

- What approaches are there for delivering skills? What approaches are most effective?
- What are the benefits and outcomes of developing skills?
- What are the benefits and outcomes of outdoor learning?
- What works well for delivering opportunities that develop skills?
- What works less well for delivering opportunities that develop skills?
- What methodologies are used by existing studies to measure skills development?

An initial scoping exercise was conducted using a series of bespoke search criteria, as well as inclusion and exclusion criteria. The abstracts and executive summaries of the literature were initially reviewed to assess their relevance. Forty-four relevant sources were then extracted and reviewed in full. The literature review largely draws upon 'grey' literature, including programme evaluations, systematic evidence reviews, and policy documents. The empirical literature has focused on a variety of ages when examining the skill development of young people, ranging between 9 and 27 years old. Where known, the ages of young people are highlighted when discussing existing studies. This is so that transferability assessments can be made between the findings and Our Bright Future participants aged 11-24, where applicable.

One limitation of the literature review is that it was conducted pre-COVID-19, and so does not explore the effects, nor the after-effects of the pandemic and its corresponding measures upon skills provision and outcomes (out of scope for this review).

Data collection

Project Manager Interviews

In order to conduct this deep dive study into skills approaches and development within the Our Bright Future programme, in-depth, semi-structured telephone interviews were carried out with project managers of a sample of Our Bright Future projects. **Ten interviews** were completed. A focussed sample of projects was selected, based on a number of factors, including: whether the project was still “live” at the time the study was carried out²⁰; whether the project or an element of the project had a clear focus on delivering provision intended to develop skills; ensuring a spread of project characteristics (e.g., by region, target beneficiaries, project type); and, importantly, ensuring that a *wide range of approaches and models for developing skills* were covered.

It is important to note that project managers were asked to focus specifically on the aspects of their project *relating to skills development and outcomes*, and not on other strands of activity pertaining to broader target outcomes. Unavoidably there was some overlap.

Online survey of participants and ex-participants

As part of a parallel thematic study of alumni undertaken by the programme’s evaluators, an online survey was developed and used to gather **self-reported evidence of impacts** of Our Bright Future for young people. The survey was distributed by the programme team to all project managers, who were asked, in turn, to distribute it via e-mail to ex-participants. The survey resulted in a sample of participants (n=258) across the portfolio. The results of the survey are detailed in a separate report *Employability, social action and well-being related impacts of participation in Our Bright Future for young people*. Within the survey, a series of questions were added to gather quantitative data on skills gained through the programme to contribute to this study, providing additional insights direct from young people, specifically around destinations and longer-term outcomes.

Review of supporting secondary evidence

Alongside the in-depth interviews, project managers were invited to submit supporting evidence of skills outcomes for participants within their project. An information request form was provided by the evaluators to gather key information on the approach to skills development, and to outline suggested evidence (quantitative and/or qualitative) for submission. Project managers could also choose to submit additional evidence beyond those proposed examples.

Seven of the ten project managers completed the information request, and eight of the ten project managers interviewed provided supporting evidence. Following this, a total of 37 documents were reviewed by the evaluators. The format, scope, and focus of the evidence submitted was wide-ranging – such as externally commissioned reports, survey data, interview and testimonial data – and as such could not be directly collated. This evidence has therefore been used thematically and indicatively, and as far as possible to corroborate findings arising from the primary research element of the study.

Certain limitations of this evidence exist in that it is secondary data and sometimes partial. Broadly, evidence was reviewed against a number of criteria, including whether stated outcomes appeared attributable to the activities delivered by the project in question, as well as other factors such as inclusion of base (total) number of respondents alongside quantitative survey data, for example.

²⁰ Some projects within the portfolio had already completed and closed at the time of the research.

Follow-up site visits

Following the completion of project manager interviews and review of evidence, it was intended that a sample of those projects would be approached to arrange site visits. The purpose of the site visits would have primarily been to more fully understand selected approaches taken, focussing on the “how” and verifying approaches “in action”.

Due to the ongoing uncertainty throughout 2020, with a series of intermittent lockdowns, and a period of Our Bright Future project delivery staff being furloughed, these site visits could not be scheduled in 2020. However, due to the wealth of evidence submitted by projects, this is not felt to have limited the ability to responding to the research questions involved in the study.

Data analysis

Broadly, qualitative *interview data* was analysed *thematically*. This involved collating and coding data in relation to the research questions and sub-questions for the study. This enabled “themes” or “clusters” of findings to be developed.

Secondary evidence was reviewed, and relevant extracts coded thematically, in order to provide corroborating evidence (of varying types) to support emerging findings.

Quantitative e-survey data was analysed in Excel in order to facilitate presentation of graphs and tables.

Data limitations

A few data limitations set out below.

- The study is a “*deep dive*” into approaches administered by a sample of projects; therefore, it seeks to be *indicative* rather than *representative*. However, the study has sought to generate learning which is widely applicable, and themes are, unless specified, supported by multiple evidence sources.
- Importantly, whilst the postponements in site visits posed a potential gap in corroborating data, it was possible for verifying data to be reviewed as part of the secondary evidence synthesis.
- In the case of supporting materials submitted by project managers, data collection was not carried out directly by the evaluation team and therefore has not been independently verified by the programme evaluators; however, particular relevance and quality criteria were applied as part of the review of evidence.
- The incorporation of secondary evidence, as well as the smaller sample size of interviewees has limited the ability to name specific project examples and to provide first-hand accounts from young people. However, all accounts supplied were reviewed and have been used to inform findings. It was not an objective of this study to develop case studies.

APPENDIX B LITERATURE AND EVIDENCE REVIEW

Introduction

This short literature review helped scope and provided context for this thematic study, and is intended to provide a broad evidence-base as a backdrop and to aid examination of approaches adopted as part of Our Bright Future. This review focuses on relevant literature linked to the skill development of young people engaged in youth and environmental provisions.

Defining ‘skills’

Literature often references how young people develop and use skills, without clearly defining what the term ‘skills’ encompasses. Skills can be categorised in a number of ways. They can be grouped as ‘hard’ or ‘soft’. Hard skills are generally quantifiable (e.g., the ability to speak in foreign languages)²¹. Soft skills are subjective, and sometimes termed ‘interpersonal skills’, as they relate to how a person interacts with others. Skills can also be categorised as ‘social and emotional skills’, which are “an integrated set of affective, cognitive and behavioural competencies including self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making”²².

It is important to be explicit about what is meant by the term ‘skills’ in order for this thematic study to have a clear focus. For the purpose of this review, both hard and soft skills are in scope, with a primary focus on practical and/or environmental skills, as well as social and emotional competencies. However, work-based skills, life skills, and cognitive skills are also considered within scope. Leadership skills and competencies, in the context of environmental leadership, form the focus of a parallel thematic study, and therefore out of scope.

Policy and current provision

There has been a shift in public discourse regarding the role of young people in society. McKenna and Edwards argue that there is now greater emphasis on young people being active citizens, which is rooted in the growing youth social action agenda²³. Youth social action is defined as “young people taking practical action in the service of others in order to create positive social change that is of benefit to the wider community as well as the young person themselves”²⁴. It can also involve young people making a positive contribution to the environment²⁵. Youth social action includes, but is not limited to, volunteering, campaigning and fundraising.

The UK Government has emphasised the importance of developing social action projects and encouraging young people’s involvement²⁶. This is underpinned by the Government’s ambition for a stronger society, where young people have the skills to fulfil their potential²⁷. Along with making investments in this area, the Government has made a commitment to strengthen the evidence base for youth development initiatives²⁸. Some of the existing initiatives in this area follow overleaf.

²¹ [The Balance, Hard vs Soft Skills: What is the Difference?](#)

²² Barry M.M *et al*, ‘A Review of the Evidence on the Effects of Community-Based Programs on Young People’s Social and Emotional Skills Development’ (2018) 3(1) Adolescent Research Review 13-27.

²³ McKenna and Edwards, *Giving Social Action a Voice: Reframing Communication as Social Action* (January 2016).

²⁴ [Barry *et al* \(2018\) citing Youth Foundation \(2013\).](#)

²⁵ [iwill, Youth Social Action.](#)

²⁶ [Barry *et al* \(2018\); HM Government, Civil Society Strategy: Building a Future that Works for Everyone \(August 2018\).](#)

²⁷ [UK Gov, Centre for Social Action \(2016\).](#)

²⁸ [Barry *et al* \(2018\)](#)

Youth Social Action Fund²⁹ (2013) was established by the Cabinet Office, which invested £1.2m. The aim of the fund is to support youth social action opportunities. It is split into two separate funds that receive match investment from Pears Foundation and UK Community Foundations (UKCF).

National Youth Social Action Fund (2013) is the national level strand of the Youth Social Action Fund, set up in 2013. It is jointly run by the Cabinet Office and Pears Foundation. The £1.26m fund is for organisations working with young people in deprived or rural areas.

Local Youth Social Action Fund (2013) is the local level strand of the Youth Social Action Fund, managed by UKCF. The £510,000 fund aims to grow social action in Norfolk, Suffolk, and Cambridgeshire.

The #iwill campaign was set up in 2013 by HRH The Prince of Wales and the leaders of the three main political parties, following the inception of the National Youth Social Action Fund³⁰. The UK-wide campaign was being coordinated by the charity, Step Up to Serve³¹. The aim of the campaign was to increase participation of young people aged 10-20 years in social action by 50 per-cent by 2020.

The #iwill fund (2016) was a £40m centralised funding pot provided by the DCMS and NLCF³². The fund launched in 2016 to support the #iwill campaign. Through the fund, investment was distributed through working with other funders to develop funding programmes that enable more young people to take part in high quality and sustained social action.

National Citizen Service (NCS)³³ (2011) is a development programme for young people aged 16 and 17 in England funded by the Government. It launched in 2011 as part of the Government's Big Society initiative. The programme helps young people develop their skills, through their involvement in social action projects that help their communities.

Youth Accelerator Fund³⁴ (2019) was an investment of £7million in Government funds to expand existing youth projects. It aims to address urgent needs in the youth sector by delivering extra sessions and activities to help young people develop skills and contribute to their communities. The fund is divided between grants for youth projects and a place-based fund.

Youth Investment Fund (2020) is a £500m fund that is running for five years from April 2020. This fund aims to give young people somewhere to go and an opportunity to do something positive and connect with their communities. Half of the investment will fund new facilities and youth centres, and the other half will be invested in activities that teach young people important skills.

It is also recognised that young people benefit from engaging with the environment and learning outdoors. Under the 25-year Environment Plan³⁵, the Government is committed to encouraging children to become closer to nature to improve their well-being. Some existing initiatives are set out immediately overleaf.

²⁹ [Gov, Youth Social Action Fund](#)

³⁰ [Birdwell et al, The State of the Service Nation: Youth Social Action in the UK \(2013\)](#)

³¹ [#iwill campaign](#)

³² [The #iwill Fund.](#)

³³ [National Citizen Service](#)

³⁴ [UK Gov, 12 million boost for youth projects \(October 2019\)](#)

³⁵ [HM Government, A Green Future: Our 25 Year Plan to Improve the Environment \(2018\).](#)

Children and Nature Programme (2019) has received £10million of funding from the Department of Education³⁶. It aims to help young people from disadvantaged backgrounds get better access to natural environments. The funding is split between the following initiatives:

- **Nature Friendly Schools** is a four-year £6.4million project, led by The Wildlife Trusts. During the project, school children are given the opportunity to become involved in nature to benefit their learning, health, and well-being. Teachers receive training on how to integrate outdoor learning with the National Curriculum.
- **Growing Care Farming**³⁷ is a £1.4m project delivered by Social Farms & Gardens and Thrive. The project creates opportunities for children and adults with various barriers to benefit from health, social, and specialist educational care services delivered on care farms in England.
- **Community Forest Woodland Outreach** is a £919,784 grants project that aims to increase and sustain community forest and woodland outreach activities that are delivered to school children from disadvantaged backgrounds, in order to benefit their health and well-being³⁸.

Overall, there are a wide range of initiatives and programmes that provide young people with the opportunity to develop their skills and well-being. However, as this document will demonstrate, the evidence base for understanding how skills are developed and what works well/less well, is somewhat limited.

Skills development approaches

There are different types of opportunities and interventions for young people to develop their skills, including structured youth social action programmes, informal youth social action, unpaid conservation or environmental work, and outdoor learning programmes and events. Through these opportunities, young people are participating in formal and informal volunteering³⁹, social action project development and delivery, residentials, training, accreditation, and non-formal awards⁴⁰.

³⁶ [Nature Friendly Schools](#).

³⁷ [Social Farms and Gardens, Growing Care Farming](#).

³⁸ [Council for Learning Outside the Classroom \(2019\)](#).

³⁹ Volunteering is an activity that is unpaid, undertaken through an act of free will and benefits the environment or people in society. Formal volunteering takes place through a group or organisation, whereas informal volunteering is undertaken independently of these structures. [Ockenden and Stuart, Review of Evidence on the Outcomes of Youth Volunteering, Social Action and Leadership \(Institute for Volunteering Research, 2014\) citing The Compact \(2009\) and Paine et al \(2010\)](#).

⁴⁰ Non formal awards are achieved through planned and structured content with learning outcomes. They are offered by a range of bodies and organisations, and vary in content, range and scope. However, they are all conducted in a non-formal setting (i.e., youth provision) and voluntary. [NYA, Awards for young people: Recognising learning in non-formal settings \(2010\)](#)

Literature also highlights that apprenticeships⁴¹, work experience, traineeships⁴², and pre-vocational learning programmes⁴³, offered through the education sector, are routes to skill development. However, there is limited evidence showing how these solutions are offered through the youth sector and the voluntary and community sector.

A common approach for skills development in the youth sector has been volunteering and social action projects. For example, the National Citizen Service programme consists of four weeks of activities, which involve an outdoor residential week for team-building and to learn life skills, a community-based social action project (30 hours of volunteering in their local communities), followed by a graduation ceremony⁴⁴.

There is also some evidence that outdoor learning programmes and events provide routes for skill development, through volunteering and social action approaches. For example, schools have implemented outdoor learning programmes, which combine outdoor learning activities, after-school clubs, and community social action⁴⁵. Activities outside of the classroom include gardening, first aid, charity fundraising, and community days⁴⁶. However, Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) found that there are few opportunities for young people to gain accreditations through voluntary conservation work⁴⁷. ESRC found that internal certification and awards were more common.

Benefits of interventions

There are a broad range of benefits for young people participating in youth and environmental provisions. The key benefits, reportedly stemming from skills development, are described below.

Well-being

Social action, non-formal awards, and volunteering are often associated with higher levels of well-being and life satisfaction, and other personal benefits including confidence, self-esteem, and happiness⁴⁸. Correlations have been found between improved well-being and interpersonal skill development among young people aged 14-17⁴⁹.

⁴¹ Apprenticeships can adopt a formal 'dual approach' (structured programmes of learning combined with workplace training, followed by assessments and certification) or informal (a young person learns on the job by shadowing of an experienced worker. [Brewer, Enhancing youth employability: What? Why? and How? Guide to core work skills \(2013\)](#); [World of Labour, Skills or Jobs, which comes first?](#)

⁴² Traineeships are voluntary six-month programmes of work placements and work preparation training, which were introduced in England in 2013. The aim is to develop the skills and experience of young people, to help them secure an apprenticeship or employment. Dorsett and Stokes, The impacts of pre-apprenticeship training for young people (2019) 4(3) International Journal of Population Data Science 131.

⁴³ For example, Skills2Succeed is a pre-vocational and work-based learning programme that aims to increase employability of young people. It is available to young people post-GCSE, providing students with an alternative to, or stepping stone towards, further education. [Cornish C, 'Case Study: Level 1 Skills to Succeed students and the gatekeeping function of GCSEs at an FE College' \(2017\)](#)

⁴⁴ [Kantar Public and London Economics \(2017\)](#)

⁴⁵ [Siddiqui N et al, 'Can learning beyond the classroom impact on social responsibility and academic attainment? An evaluation of the Children's University youth social action programme' \(2019\) 61 Studies in Educational Evaluation 74](#)

⁴⁶ [Ibid.](#)

⁴⁷ [ERSC, Environmental Skills for Young People in Rural Communities.](#)

⁴⁸ [Traverse, Research to Understand Environmental Volunteering Amongst Young People \(DEFRA 2019\)](#); [NYA, Awards for young people: Recognising learning in non-formal settings \(2010\)](#); [The Careers and Enterprise Company, Involving Young People in Volunteering: What Works \(2017\)](#); [Early Intervention Foundation, Social and Emotional Learning: Skills for Life and Work \(Cabinet Office\)](#); [National Youth Social Action Survey \(2015 and 2016\).](#)

⁴⁹ [Birdwell and Bani, 'Today's Teenagers Are More Engaged with Social Issues Than Ever \(Demos, 2014\)](#)

Young people have reported that participating in social action and volunteering improves their wellbeing. For example, McKenna and Edwards found that 74 % of the 16-25-year olds surveyed reported improvements in their self-esteem as a result of participating in the social action project 'Fixers' (n=100)⁵⁰. An evaluation of four youth social action programmes also discovered that school children participating had reduced levels of anxiety and increased life satisfaction, when compared to control groups⁵¹. Positive effects on self-esteem have been identified among female volunteers aged 14-17, in particular⁵². Work placements, offered to 14-15-year olds within the education sector, reportedly develop confidence in the abilities of pupils⁵³. Messer argues this is because pupils are able to observe themselves applying and developing skills in a real-world environment.

However, it is important to highlight that these outcomes are not always reached. For example, a study found that the National Citizen Service (NCS) did not have a statistically significant effect on self-reported well-being in 2012, but did so in 2011⁵⁴. The authors acknowledge that this may be due to the small sample size of the control group. This study also found that well-being improved among young people who joined NCS with challenging behaviour or lower well-being. These participants made up a small minority of the 2012 cohort, which may explain why a statistically significant impact on well-being was not observed more widely.

Research also indicates that environmental interventions can improve physical and mental well-being and the overall development of young people⁵⁵. Young people aged 16-24 have reported feeling happier and having more energy as a result of environmental volunteering⁵⁶. Teachers have also observed this effect following outdoor learning (89 % of 1,342 teachers surveyed)⁵⁷. Other benefits from engaging with nature, suggested by young people, include: having fresh air, being away from mobile phones, feeling calm, and having headspace⁵⁸. However, there does not appear to be a single activity that works best for improving well-being in an outdoor context⁵⁹.

Skill development

Literature suggests that volunteering, non-formal awards, and social action can have an observable impact on skills development, particularly 'basic' and 'soft' skills⁶⁰. This includes the development of leadership skills, team working, conflict resolution, time keeping, problem solving, and organisational skills⁶¹.

⁵⁰ McKenna and Edwards (2016).

⁵¹ [Behavioural Insights Team, Evaluating Youth Social Action \(January 2016\)](#); [Chiumento et al \(BMC Public Health 2018\)](#).

⁵² Birdwell and Bani (Demos, 2014)

⁵³ Messer, Work placements at 14-15 years and employability skills 60(1) Education and Training 16. (2018)

⁵⁴ NatCen, Evaluation of National Citizen Service (2012)

⁵⁵ Traverse (DEFRA 2019); [The Careers and Enterprise Company \(2017\) p.40](#); [Nature to Nurture \(2010\)](#).

⁵⁶ Traverse (DEFRA 2019); [The Careers and Enterprise Company \(2017\) p.40](#)

⁵⁷ [Prisk and Cusworth, Muddy Hands \(March 2018\)](#)

⁵⁸ [IWUN, Supporting Young People's Mental Health: How Urban Nature Can Help \(2019\)](#)

⁵⁹ [IWUN, Supporting Young People's Mental Health – How Urban Nature Can Help](#)

⁶⁰ [The Careers and Enterprise Company \(2017\)](#); [Birdwell and Bani \(Demos 2014\)](#); [NYA \(2010\)](#)

⁶¹ Traverse (DEFRA 2019) p.14; [Barry et al \(2018\)](#); [Birdwell et al \(2013\)](#); [Ockenden and Stuart \(2014\) p.10](#); [National Alliance for Secondary Education and Transition](#); [UK Community Foundations p.4](#).

Within the education sector, work experience and apprenticeships build technical and social skills, achieved by a 'learning on the job' approach⁶². For example, Messer surveyed 296 students aged 14-15, before and after their two-week work placements. Messer found students rated their skills -which included time keeping, communication, and ability to follow instructions- higher after their unpaid placements. Surveys were conducted with their employers to validate these findings, which yielded marginally lower ratings of skill development.

Uniformed social action groups, such as Scouts and Girlguiding, reportedly have a positive effect on skill development⁶³. Young people, parents and group organisers have expressed that young people gain qualifications, confidence, leadership skills and communication skills from participating in uniformed programmes⁶⁴. More robust research has found that NCS has a statistically significant positive impact on participants' communication, teamwork and leadership skills, in comparison to a control group⁶⁵.

This evidence provides some indication that social action has a positive effect on young people, regardless of whether interventions have an environmental focus. Nonetheless, environmental organisations have reportedly observed young people developing life skills through social action⁶⁶. Research has highlighted that grantees of the Social Action Fund feel that environmental projects help young people gain confidence, knowledge of the environment, new skills and qualifications, such as first aid training⁶⁷.

While literature largely suggests that participation in youth programmes increases skill development, some studies have not found this correlation to be significant among younger age groups. For example, Siddiqui et al found that children aged 9-10 involved in a youth social action programme were only slightly ahead of the control group in terms of teamwork skills (+0.05)⁶⁸. Furthermore, a robust evaluation of four youth social action programmes found that school children increased their problem-solving skills, but this was not statistically significant when compared to the control groups⁶⁹.

Education and learning attainment

It is claimed that the development of soft skills, through youth programmes and leadership experiences, subsequently improves academic performance and engagement in education⁷⁰. To illustrate, Siddiqui *et al* found that young people (aged 9-10) engaged in social action programmes performed better in maths and reading tests, than the control group. Non-formal awards are also considered an effective way of reintroducing young people to education and increasing their motivation to learn⁷¹. Students have expressed that undertaking work experience and placements helped them to understand the importance of doing well at school⁷².

⁶² As argued within, [World of Labour, Skills or Jobs, which comes first?](#)

⁶³ [Gorard et al \(Education Endowment Foundation, 2016\)](#)

⁶⁴ As discussed within [Gorard et al \(2016\) citing Moon et al \(2010\) and Volunteer Now \(2014\)](#)

⁶⁵ [Birdwell et al \(2013\); NatCen \(2012\).](#)

⁶⁶ [Dillon et al \(2003\); ERSC, Environmental Skills for Young People in Rural Communities.](#)

⁶⁷ [UK Community Foundations, Youth Social Action.](#)

⁶⁸ [Siddiqui et al \(2019\).](#)

⁶⁹ [Behavioural Insights Team, Evaluating Youth Social Action \(January 2016\) p.20-23.](#)

⁷⁰ [National Alliance for Secondary Education and Transition; Birdwell et al \(2013\); Barry et al \(2018\).](#)

⁷¹ NYA (2010)

⁷² Messer (2017)

Literature also emphasises the importance of outdoor learning on educational outcomes. It is argued that residential experiences, featuring outdoor learning, have a transformative impact on pupils and their school progress, particularly for vulnerable pupils⁷³. Many teachers note that pupils are more engaged in learning during outdoor lessons (88 % of 713 teachers)⁷⁴. Teachers suggest that outdoor learning helps pupils develop knowledge and beliefs about the environment⁷⁵. Together, this evidence highlights how learning and development does not always occur in the classroom.

Employability

Young people regard volunteering as a means for developing skills, gaining experience and gathering content for their CVs, which will help their careers⁷⁶. Studies have found that older or socio-economically disadvantaged young people, in particular, identify with employability motivations⁷⁷. A survey conducted by the National Union of Students (NUS) found that 57 % of young people would participate in social action if it meant they would learn new skills to help them get a job⁷⁸.

Literature also indicates that volunteering, social action, work placements and unpaid work experience can increase employability skills⁷⁹. UK and international studies have also shown that work placements can lead to employability outcomes (e.g., entering into employment, increased job quality and higher earnings)⁸⁰. Across these studies, college and university students have regarded work placements as valuable for getting a job and identifying the career they want to pursue⁸¹.

Moreover, a survey of 100 young people aged 16-25, found the majority believed they had gained skills associated with enhanced employability by participating in the social action project, 'Fixers' (78 %)⁸². 59 % also felt the project helped them into education, employment or training. More robust research, using mock interviews to measure employability, found that interview ratings were higher among those, aged 16-20, participating in social action⁸³.

Despite the general consensus that various youth provisions improve employability skills and outcomes, evidence is not conclusive in this area. For example, Dorsett and Stokes found that traineeships improved the chances of young people (aged 16-18) securing apprenticeships but not employment. Moreover, as Ockenden and Stuart note, there is currently an absence of quality evidence establishing a direct causal link between volunteering and employability⁸⁴.

⁷³ Institute of Outdoor Learning citing Dudman *et al* (2019).

⁷⁴ Prisk C and Cusworth H, *Muddy Hands* (March 2018).

⁷⁵ [Dillon *et al*, The Final Report of the Outdoor Classroom in a Rural Context Action Research Project \(2003\)](#).

⁷⁶ Traverse (DEFRA 2019) p.19; [Ockenden and Stuart \(2014\)](#).

⁷⁷ Birdwell *et al* 2013; Traverse (DEFRA 2019) p.17. Traverse explain that due to underrepresentation, literature does not provide much insight into the motivations and experiences of disadvantaged groups, such as ethnic minorities, young people with disabilities and those from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

⁷⁸ Traverse (DEFRA 2019) p.19.

⁷⁹ [The Careers and Enterprise Company \(2017\)](#); [NYA \(2010\)](#); [What works in youth employment](#); [Messer D \(2017\)](#).

⁸⁰ [The Careers and Enterprise Company \(2017\)](#); [NYA \(2010\)](#); [What works in youth employment](#); [Messer D \(2017\)](#); [Eden \(2013\)](#)

⁸¹ Messer (2017) citing Fullarton (1999); Smith *et al* (2004); National Support Group for Work Experience (2008)

⁸² [McKenna and Edwards \(2016\)](#).

⁸³ [Behavioural Insights Team, Evaluating Youth Social Action \(January 2016\)](#).

⁸⁴ [Ockenden and Stuart \(2014\)](#).

Best practice and success factors

The same benefits can reportedly be gained from informal social action and structured programmes⁸⁵. Studies have identified components across these different solutions that appear to encourage skill development. This includes strong relationships with adults running the provision, clear roles for young people, and training that gets young people working in teams⁸⁶. Young people, aged 16-24, feel strongly that adults running youth provisions should understand the existing skills of young people, in order to tailor activities to utilise and build on their skillset⁸⁷. For organisations offering non-formal awards, spending time at the outset to explore the needs of young people, listen to their concerns and build rapport is considered an essential prerequisite for a successful programme⁸⁸.

The overall programme design may also influence skill development. For example, it is reported that the NCS approach of running activities that test communication skills, and requiring young people to take on leadership roles, works well⁸⁹. The supportive environment created and providing young people with something useful to take away (e.g., developing CV), also works well in this context⁹⁰. For environmental initiatives, it has been suggested that hands-on and informal exploration of local and familiar environments helps to inspire young people, which in turn may facilitate skill development⁹¹.

According to stakeholders, other ways to maximise skill development include: linking with employers; offering a range of activities, accreditation⁹², and opportunities for self-directed learning; and having activities that link with young people's interests⁹³. Furthermore, literature suggests that young people participating in formal apprenticeship develop their skills when mentoring is provided, and they undergo real-world and hands-on experiences⁹⁴. Similarly, university students note that mentoring, goal setting, reflection activities, and professional development events, which featured within their work placements, were important and helped them to develop skills⁹⁵.

While different provisions can facilitate skill development, it is acknowledged that structured programmes give young people (aged 10-20) a greater sense of recognition, via certification and awards⁹⁶. Informal awards and certification provide status and credibility, which may be important as young people can find it difficult to demonstrate the skills that they have developed⁹⁷. Leyshon and Fish have argued that accreditation should be more widely available and less ad hoc⁹⁸, although they have not specified the type or format of accreditation that this should include.

⁸⁵ [National Youth Social Action Survey \(2015 and 2016\).](#)

⁸⁶ [National Alliance for Secondary Education and Transition, Youth Development and Youth Leadership.](#)

⁸⁷ Traverse, *Research to Understand Environmental Volunteering Amongst Young People* (DEFRA 2019) p.54.

⁸⁸ NYA (2010).

⁸⁹ [NatCen \(2012\).](#)

⁹⁰ [NatCen \(2012\).](#)

⁹¹ [Wilson C, Effective Approaches to Connect Children with Nature \(Department of Conservation, 2011\).](#)

⁹² However, stakeholders did not specify the type, format, or level accreditation that would be desirable.

⁹³ Traverse (DEFRA 2019) p.54.

⁹⁴ Brewer (2013).

⁹⁵ Jackson (2015).

⁹⁶ [National Youth Social Action Survey \(2015 and 2016\).](#)

⁹⁷ Brewer (2013).

⁹⁸ [ERSC, Environmental Skills for Young People in Rural Communities.](#)

As young people's volunteering motivations are often to gain experience for university and job applications⁹⁹, running activities that provide clear career benefits or incentives (e.g., training and accreditation) could encourage young people to participate and gain skills¹⁰⁰.

Challenges

Literature has identified a number of challenges that youth organisations and programmes face when delivering opportunities that develop skills. For one, it has been noted that social action is difficult to implement in school settings. Teachers have suggested that schools are not well designed to develop soft skills and attitudes¹⁰¹. This may, therefore, underscore the importance of providing opportunities for young people to develop their soft skills in alternative settings.

Career focused and older participants sometimes 'dip into' volunteering activities to gain the skills they require, and subsequently move into education, training or employment¹⁰². While skill development is valuable and an important social action 'hook', this can be challenging for voluntary organisations that rely on volunteers and require longer-term commitment.

Lastly, it has been argued that youth social action and accreditation programmes focus heavily on skills development and "churning out accredited graduates"¹⁰³. McKenna and Edwards argue this leads to social action becoming "a set of non-discursive, practical activities, which can leave the value of young people's voices side-lined". They further suggest that this results in social action programmes becoming prescriptive. Therefore, it is important that social action is not considered a means to an end, but is reframed as being youth-led and having intrinsic value.

Methodologies of existing evaluations

From reviewing the literature, it is clear that the UK evidence base in this field could be strengthened. The common methodological approaches and their limitations will now be discussed.

Common methodological approaches

Across the studies described previously, similar methodologies have been utilised to assess and measure skill development. The most common approach has been to utilise surveys to gather feedback and evidence from young people about the skills they have gained¹⁰⁴. Most often a pre-post approach to surveying young people was adopted, which provides baseline and enables comparisons to be made.

Interviews, observations, and focus groups methods were used more sporadically¹⁰⁵. Moreover, few studies have utilised randomised control trials, in conjunction with surveys or other methods¹⁰⁶, which would enable comparisons of outcomes to be made between those who have received 'treatment' (participated in an intervention) and those who have not.

⁹⁹ Traverse (DEFRA 2019) p.28; [Birdwell et al \(2013\)](#).

¹⁰⁰ Traverse (DEFRA 2019) p.14; [Ockenden and Stuart \(2014\) citing Ellis \(2004\) and Low et al \(2007\)](#).

¹⁰¹ [Birdwell and Bani \(Demos 2014\)](#).

¹⁰² Traverse (DEFRA 2019).

¹⁰³ [McKenna and Edwards \(2016\)](#); [Tania de St Croix \(2017\)](#).

¹⁰⁴ For example, [NYSA Survey \(2015/2016\)](#); [Birdwell and Bani \(Demos 2014\)](#); [McKenna and Edwards \(2016\)](#); [Jackson \(2015\)](#).

¹⁰⁵ For example, [Birdwell and Bani \(Demos 2014\)](#).

¹⁰⁶ For example, [NatCen \(2012\)](#); [Gorard et al \(2016\)](#); [Siddiqui et al \(2019\)](#).

While the absence of control groups contributes to ‘weak’ research ratings,¹⁰⁷ it is important to consider the ethical and practical implications of this approach.

Methodological limitations

Survey research often uses Likert scales and single-item questions, covering a range of outcomes for participants to provide ratings against¹⁰⁸. However, as Ockenden and Stuart explain, the scales that capture skill development vary across these studies. Researchers have chosen to develop their own instruments or build upon existing measures. Furthermore, as Barry *et al* note, many studies do not use validated or standardised outcome measures, which affects the quality of the evidence yielded. As Barry *et al* explain, standardised and validated measures are established when the ‘construct validity’ and ‘test–retest reliability’ of these outcome measures are established, and are consistently used and reported across all studies.

Outcomes Frameworks, including the Centre of Youth Impact’s (CYI) Framework for Young People¹⁰⁹, have been developed to ensure the youth sector is consistently and effectively monitoring impact, so that conditions for developing young people’s skills can be improved. The CYI framework consists of 6 skill domains (responsibility, empathy, problem solving, initiative, teamwork, emotion management) and indicators of progress for each domain. However, the framework does not advocate a particular methodology for measuring skill development against these indicators. Instead, the CYI emphasises the importance of selecting tools that are valid, reliable, feasible to administer, and the best fit for the circumstances and context.

It is also recognised that surveys often include items to assess complex constructs, such as ‘resilience’¹¹⁰. As respondents may interpret these constructs differently, it is imperative that all research tools use simple language and terms that are well defined.

The evidence of skill development among young people is largely self-reported and not independently assessed¹¹¹, purportedly reducing the utility of the findings, although other perspectives may place youth voice and self-perception as central. To counter this, additional methods have been adopted, which may alleviate this. For example, conducting tests to assess change in young people’s skills (e.g., mock job interviews and maths tests)¹¹², observations of activity¹¹³, and consultations with parents, teachers, employers, and organisers can help to verify self-reported skill development¹¹⁴. This informed our suggested approach for site visits, and for seeking validating secondary evidence from those connected with the young people reportedly gaining skills.

¹⁰⁷ Scholars conducting systematic literature reviews assessed the strength of studies, in terms of the methodology adopted and evidence yield. Studies were assigned ‘weak’, ‘moderate’ or ‘high’ quality ratings. Factors that contributed to a ‘weak’ quality rating included: the use of non-validated outcome measures; non-standardised outcome measures; sample bias; failure to report on study attrition rates; lack of statistical analysis; lack of control groups; and, self-report questionnaires.

¹⁰⁸ As explained within [Ockenden and Stuart \(2014\)](#); [Siddiqui et al \(2019\)](#).

¹⁰⁹ [Centre of Youth Impact, A Framework of Outcomes for Young People 2.0 \(November 2019\)](#).

¹¹⁰ [Barry et al \(2018\)](#).

¹¹¹ As found within, [Ockenden and Stuart \(2014\)](#); [Birdwell et al \(2013\)](#).

¹¹² [Behavioural Insights Team, Evaluating Youth Social Action \(January 2016\) p.20-23](#); [Siddiqui et al \(2019\)](#).

¹¹³ [Cornish \(2017\)](#).

¹¹⁴ As used within, [Traverse \(DEFRA 2019\)](#); [Birdwell & Bani \(Demos 2014\)](#); [Prisk & Cusworth \(2018\)](#); [Messer \(2017\)](#).

Overall, studies have shown the positive impact that volunteering and social action can have on young people's well-being, skill development, educational attainment and employability. However, the methodological limitations across the UK evidence base, means that robust statements drawing causal links between initiatives and these outcomes can rarely be made¹¹⁵. However, as Barry *et al* explain, the lack of good quality evidence is not evidence of a lack of effectiveness.

Key findings

This review has highlighted that there are a number of approaches to skill development, which yield similar positive outcomes for young people, across a range of skills domains, as shown in **Table A.1** overleaf. Research has frequently shown that young people experience improved mental, physical, and emotional well-being as a result of participating in youth and environmental provisions. The most commonly reported skills that young people gain and develop were leadership, teamwork and communication. However, as **Table A.1** highlights, a diverse range of skills were identified. Studies seldom reported on those skills that young people already hold and subsequently utilised whilst participating in youth provisions.

The literature and evidence reviewed collectively supports the conclusion that there is “no difference between those doing meaningful social action and those participating in structured programmes...” in terms of the benefits that can be gained¹¹⁶. Moreover, the evidence suggests that social action and volunteering can have a positive effect on young people and their development, regardless of whether provisions have an environmental focus. However, it is important to highlight that formal outdoor learning, and environmental volunteering and social action projects generate additional outcomes, such as knowledge of the environment, beliefs about the environment and ‘practical skills’.

- 2.1 The vast majority of studies utilise survey and interview methods that provide self-reported evidence of skill development. This purportedly reduces the utility of the findings, as skill development is not independently verified. This may also result in other outcomes, or types of skills, being overlooked (i.e., young people may not recall or realise they have developed a particular skill). This must be considered when reviewing the table below.

Table A.1: Overview of outcomes gained through different approaches to skill development		
Approach	Associated Outcomes (Reported)	Evidence
Environmental Volunteering and Social Action	▪ Mental and physical well-being ▪ Emotional well-being ▪ Teamwork skills ▪ Practical skills ▪ Knowledge of environment ▪ Enhanced employability	▪ Traverse (2019) ▪ ERSC
Outdoor learning and engaging with nature	▪ Mental and physical well-being ▪ Emotional well-being ▪ Confidence ▪ Cognitive skills ▪ Social skills ▪ Engagement with education ▪ Knowledge of the environment ▪ Beliefs about the environment ▪ Fulfilling potential	▪ Prisk and Cusworth (2018) ▪ Chiumento (2018) ▪ UK Youth (2018) ▪ Engaging and Learning with the Outdoors (2003) ▪ IWUN ▪ Nature to Nurture

¹¹⁵ As suggested within, [The Careers and Enterprise Company \(2017\)](#); [Birdwell et al \(2013\)](#).

¹¹⁶ [National Youth Social Action Survey \(2015 and 2016\)](#).

Uniformed programmes	- Confidence and self-esteem - Leadership skills - Teamwork skills - Communication skills - Qualifications	- Gorard <i>et al</i> (2016) - Volunteer Now (2014) - Girlguiding (2012/13) - Moon <i>et al</i> (2010)
Residentials	- Mindfulness - Confidence - Happiness - Resilience - Develop friendships - Teamwork skills - Communication skills - Leadership skills - Engagement in learning	- Dudman et al (2019) - Natcen (2012)
Non-formal awards	- Confidence and self-esteem - Personal skills - Social skills - Motivation to learn - Positive attitudes and behaviours - Employability - Engagement in education	NYA (2010)
Apprenticeships and traineeships within the education sector	- General transferable skills - Job specific skills - Teamwork skills - Communication skills - Problem solving skills - Employability	- Dorsett and Stokes (2019) - Brewer (2013)
Work placements and experience within the education sector	- Confidence and self-esteem - Social skills - Building relationships - Independence and social attitudes - Communication skills - Writing skills - IT and numeracy skills - Time keeping - Following instructions - Technical skills and knowledge - Engagement in learning - Employability	- Messer (2017) - Eden (2014) World of Labour
Structured programmes e.g., NCS	- Emotional well-being - Confidence - Leadership skills - Teamwork skills - Communication skills - Problem solving skills - Social skills - Organisational skills - Conflict resolution skills - Computer competency - Self-efficacy and self-advocacy - Academic performance - Progression into EET - Enhanced employability	- Barry et al (2018) - McKenna (2016) - Ockenden (2014) - Natcen (2012) - NCS Interim Assessment National Alliance
Youth Volunteering	Confidence, self-esteem and motivation	Careers and Enterprise Company (2017)

	▪ Leadership skills ▪ Team working skills ▪ Time management skills ▪ Communication skills ▪ Presentation skills ▪ Negotiation skills ▪ Enhanced employability	▪ Ockenden and Stuart (2014) ▪ Youth Foundation (2013) ▪ NYA (2008)
Youth Social Action	▪ Mental and physical well-being ▪ Emotional well-being ▪ Confidence and self-esteem ▪ Motivation and resilience ▪ Soft skills ▪ Problem solving skills ▪ Leadership skills ▪ Teamwork skills ▪ Organisational skills ▪ Communication skills ▪ Money handling skills ▪ Timekeeping skills ▪ Practical skills e.g., first aid ▪ Engagement with education ▪ Academic performance ▪ Qualifications ▪ Enhanced employability ▪ Reduced substance misuse and antisocial behaviour	▪ Siddiqui <i>et al</i> (2019) ▪ Barry <i>et al</i> (2018) ▪ Careers and Enterprise Company (2017) ▪ DCMS and OCS (2016) ▪ Evaluating YSA (2016) ▪ Mckenna (2016) ▪ Gorard <i>et al</i> (2016) ▪ National Youth Social Action Survey (2015/16) ▪ Ockenden (2014) ▪ Birdwell and Bani (2014) ▪ UK Community Foundations ▪ Birdwell <i>et al</i> (2013) ▪ Catalano <i>et al</i> (2004) ▪ National Research Council (2002) ▪ NYA