



Grass Roots Challenge

2016 - 2021



Overview

Launched in September 2016, the Grassroots Challenge programme's 5-year target was to meaningfully engage over 5000 young people in environmental activities and projects across Northern Ireland. By September 2021 the programme had succeeded in bringing the great outdoors to life for over 9000 young people, aged 11-24.

Young people participated through partner organisations the Young Farmers' Clubs of Ulster, Duke of Edinburgh's Award / Joint Award Initiative and Special Schools. Other project partners included Keep Northern Ireland Beautiful, Northern Ireland Environment Link and Lantra. The Grassroots Challenge was one of 31 projects which made up the 'Our Bright Future' programme, a UK-wide, National Lottery Community Fund supported initiative run by a consortium of organisations led by The Wildlife Trusts.

Ulster Wildlife co-ordinated delivery of the Grassroots Challenge with a team of 5 full-time and part-time project staff (Project Coordinator, Special Schools Officer, Duke of Edinburgh's Award / Joint Award Initiative Officer and two Young Farmers' Clubs Officers).

The overarching theme for Grassroots Challenge was for young people to develop skills and knowledge and to design and deliver environmental projects to enhance their local area and engage their communities in environmental action.

Building on the programme's success and maintaining the partnerships and structures developed during the Grassroots Challenge, Ulster Wildlife continues to engage young people with their local environment. The valued input and direction of the Youth Forum ensures this work continues to be youth-led with an emphasis on taking forward the three key asks identified by the wider Our Bright Future Youth Forum; more time spent learning in and about nature, support to develop and secure environmental jobs, and a greater voice for young people in decision making.



Youth Advocates at Bog Meadows Nature Reserve, Belfast

Key Achievements

9054

young people engaged



2778

community members involved



545

training places provided



668

environmental projects and activities delivered



556

communities benefitted



26

Eco Club Awards issued (15 Bronze, 7 Silver and 4 Green)



Queen's University Belfast Evaluation

In September 2019, the School of Social Sciences, Education and Social Work at Queen's University Belfast was commissioned to carry out an external evaluation of the Grassroots Challenge. This set out to establish if the programme had been successful in achieving positive change for young people against the following statements:

- I feel connected to nature and wildlife
- I want to make a difference for nature and wildlife
- I feel I can make a difference for nature and wildlife
- Making a difference for nature and wildlife also makes a difference for me

Dr Karen Kerr co-ordinated this research and her findings were published in September 2020.

"This report presents evidence that the Grassroots Challenge Project benefits the young people involved across all the evaluation statements, which represent the aims of the project. The young people who took part rated their connectness to nature as higher at the end of the project activities, more of them said they would now take part in environmental/nature/wildlife actions. They rated

their overall leadership competence as a little higher at the end of the project but they rated their perceptions of their ability to influence environmental policy decisions as much higher at the end of the project. They also recognised that making a difference for nature makes a difference for them". Dr Karen Kerr

Kerr, K. (2020) Report for Ulster Wildlife: An evaluation of the Grassroots Challenge Project 2019-20. Belfast: School of Social Sciences, Education and Social Work, Queen's University Belfast.

[Evaluation of Ulster Wildlife's Grassroots Challenge Programme by Dr. Karen Kerr, QUB - YouTube](#)



As current and future custodians of the countryside, young farmers have a central role to play in protecting and enhancing biodiversity. Through the Grassroots Challenge, young farmers were given the opportunity to take part in a number of different activities, with 95% of YFCU clubs participating in the programme at different points between 2016 and 2021. This partnership has built trust and respect that has laid the ground for exciting future work around sustainable and nature-friendly farming.

Club Night Challenges

These challenges provided an introduction to the Grassroots Challenge and focused on key wildlife species such as red squirrels, hedgehogs and barn owls as well as environmental farming related issues including water management and invasive species.

Wild Idea Projects

Young Farmers' Clubs were able to apply for up to £300 to design and deliver their own Wild Idea Projects to benefit their local area. Projects included digital wildlife and landscape photography, plastic recycling, community gardens, local clean up days, peatland restoration work, native hedgerow planting, upland path repairs, grassland management and trips to visit organic farms.



Randalstown Young Farmers' Club

Training

Participating young people availed of accredited and non-accredited training covering topics including dry stone walling, traditional wildflower meadow management, safe use of pesticides, hedge planting and Leave No Trace. A bespoke one day LANTRA accredited 'Conservation on the Farm' course was developed and delivered to students studying agriculture through CAFRE.

"Members took part in litter picks in their local communities, built bird boxes, bug hotels and flower planters and planted hedges all whilst increasing their knowledge of the environment and nature. It was fantastic to see four of our clubs achieving the prestigious Green Flag status and I hope that members will continue to work hard within their local communities to contribute to environment for all involved both as farmers and rural dwellers."

Peter Alexander, President, YFCU



Young farmer showing the Minister for Agriculture and others environmental measures around her home farm

Eco Club Awards

Clubs were supported to incorporate environmental topics and considerations into the planning of their annual programmes. Over time this has earned them Bronze, Silver and ultimately Green Flag status under the Eco Club Award Scheme administered by Keep Northern Ireland Beautiful. Over a third of all Young Farmers' Clubs have engaged with the scheme achieving 15 bronze, seven silver and four Green awards to date.

"To see our young farmers embrace sustainability and work towards their Eco-Clubs International Green Flag Award has been an absolute pleasure. The young people have gained not only knowledge but many new skills which will support them in their future endeavours and prepare them for the world of work. We hope to see continued progress from these young people in working towards their Green Flags and showing great leadership for our future."

Charlene McKeown – Education Manager KNIB



Lisnamurrigan YFC receiving their Eco Club Award Green Flag



Crumlin YFC take part in the Hedgerow Planting Challenge

"Becoming more environmentally friendly / eco-conscious can be difficult to begin however with Grassroots Challenge support and guidance our members have found it easier to adapt and change aspects of their daily lives and day to day running of club activities. By engaging in the Grassroots Challenge, it has shown our members how to help our local community and positively affect our local wildlife to ensure it is preserved for future generations to enjoy."

Crumlin Young Farmers' Club

Wild Wellness Walks

The need to promote young people's positive mental health led to the introduction of a series of Wild Wellness Walks. These gave young farmers the chance to just enjoy the natural surroundings of places such as Parkanaur Forest and Drumnaph Nature Reserve whilst learning about local biodiversity along the way.

Annual YFCU Competitions

The Grassroots Challenge supported and incorporated environmental themes into a number of Annual YFCU Competitions including Build It, Young Farmer of the Year, AGM workshops and Junior Residential.

"The Grassroots Challenge afforded us the opportunity to carry out research around the employability skills required for those seeking employment in the land based sector, specifically skills shortages and gaps that are prevalent in this industry. Subsequently Lantra were able to provide accredited training to the young people participating on the programme, to allow them to acquire the skills required to enter the workforce. Lantra is delighted to have assisted in the delivery of this worthwhile project, which will see the industry gain more qualified employees."

Paula Smyth – LANTRA Head of Business Development - All Ireland

Case Study

Mourne Young Farmers' Club

Mourne Young Farmers' Club were the first to register interest in the Grassroots Challenge back in 2016. They were the first to achieve the Bronze level of the Eco Club Awards and won the Club of the Year Award at the programme's first annual celebration event in 2017.

They delivered a wide range of wildlife projects including local peatland restoration work, building barn owl boxes, native tree planting at Ardaluin House and even producing a calendar with photos that captured the beauty and biodiversity of the Mourne Mountains.



Mourne YFC tree planting at Ardaluin House near Newcastle

Duke of Edinburgh's Award / Joint Award Initiative



The Duke of Edinburgh's Award /Joint Award Initiative is the most widely recognised and largest youth award scheme in Northern Ireland. Through the Grassroots Challenge over 50 Award groups have been supported to incorporate activities for wildlife and the environment into the completion of different sections of their Bronze, Silver or Gold Award. Undertaking environmental activities through the Duke of Edinburgh's Award has increased dramatically as a result of the Grassroots Challenge but with 8000 young people a year signing up to do the Award there is still potential to do a lot more.

Volunteering

Young people took part in direct volunteering opportunities offered through the Grassroots Challenge and in partnership with other environmental organisations including Sustrans and the National Trust at Mount Stewart. Some Award groups undertook their own self-directed environmental volunteering projects e.g. Banbridge Youth Group who developed a wildlife friendly garden in their grounds and the Boys Model School, North Belfast who made barn owl nesting boxes.



Building a barn owl nesting box



Earl of Wessex helping Award participants plant wildflowers at Hillsborough Castle

Expedition

A Wildlife Observation Pack was developed for Award groups to take on their expeditions. By making wildlife spotting and recording the aim of their expedition, young people gained a much greater appreciation and knowledge of their natural surroundings whilst making their way through the countryside.



Armagh Young Farmers learning bird identification skills

Skills

Several Award groups focused on developing environmental skills such as bird watching e.g. Beechlawn Special School and Armagh Young Farmers. One participant learned Green Woodworking for his Silver Award and made a footstool from freshly cut native timber.

"The kit which was developed by the Grassroots staff team to support expeditions with the aim of surveying flora and fauna was superb. The extra time given by the staff to each expedition to ensure that the identification charts were relevant to the area into which the young people were going, and the particular time of year, was extraordinary. All of this ensured that the young people had the best possible experience."

Kate Thompson, Director, Northern Ireland - Duke of Edinburgh's Award



Recording flora and fauna during a Gold Award expedition

Gold Award Residential

In partnership with the Belfast Activity Centre, the Grassroots Challenge delivered an annual Gold Award 5-day residential in 2017, 2018 and 2019. In total, over 50 young people attended the residencies which took place at Ardalun House in the Mourne and included practical conservation work, wildlife observation and outdoor pursuits.

Case Study Wallace High School

Duke of Edinburgh's Award participants from Wallace High School picked up a best activity award at the 2019 Grassroots Challenge annual celebration event.

This was in recognition of their work to take action about single use plastics. They held a series of assemblies about the issue and the importance of recycling. They collected single use plastics throughout the school by putting in place recycling bins. They engaged in weekly litter picks around the school as well as building over 20 bird boxes for Ulster Wildlife.

The experience gave them the opportunity to learn about working as a team, to engage in a variety of activities and have a sense of accomplishment.



Wallace High School at the 2019 annual celebration and awards evening



Sir Jeffrey Donaldson MP, Ulster Wildlife Chair Ken Brundle and young people from Ulster Wildlife's youth work programmes planting a rowan tree in memory of the late Duke of Edinburgh on what would have been his 100th birthday

Special Schools across Northern Ireland

During the development of the Grassroots Challenge, Ulster Wildlife piloted an eight-week environmental engagement programme with post-primary Special Schools. This programme was incorporated into the Grassroots Challenge enabling young people from Special Schools, who are often under-represented in environmental programmes, to take part.

Working with three Special Schools per term, the Grassroots Challenge facilitated a biodiversity survey of the school grounds, environmental education sessions and practical activities to enhance the wildlife habitat value of areas outside the classroom. In total 42 schools and 1396 pupils engaged with this part of the programme.

Seventeen Special Schools also accessed a small grant of up to £300 to carry out their own activities to further enhance the wildlife friendly areas in their school grounds or environmental initiatives within the school. Involving young people with disabilities in environmental action helps to ensure an inclusive approach to a green recovery.



Building bat boxes



Bird feeder ready to hang up

Key highlights and impacts of the work with Special Schools included:

- Getting the young people out of the classroom and enjoying practical activities. For example, Thornfield House School enjoyed investigating their moth trap, Fleming Fulton and Parkview Schools carried out bird surveys, Park School and Ardmore School built raised beds and planted vegetables, whilst Beechlawn School and Donard School planted bulbs and built mini-beast hotels. As a result school grounds were improved for wildlife with the benefits enjoyed by the whole school.
- Enabling young people to interact and engage up close with native wild animals, mostly for the first time, including barn owls, bats and hedgehogs. There was often a positive change in attitude toward native creatures for many of the young people.
- Encouraging young people to share their views through the Democracy Games at Stormont.
- A number of Eco Clubs were started up and a new enthusiasm to achieve a Green Flag through Eco Schools was sparked for many schools. As a result of participating in the Grassroots Challenge some schools realised this would now be achievable for their pupils.

- The experience helped some individuals to develop their interest in nature and become more engaged with others – enabling some young people to shine where they hadn't before.
- Young people benefitted from building knowledge and experience from week to week. Questions such as 'What's happening today?' or 'What have you got for us to see / do now?' were encouraging as the young people began to look forward to the next session. Most engaged and became more confident to talk more openly as time went on.
- Pupils engaged in and learned new practical skills such as using hammers and staplers for building bird boxes, learning how to plant bulbs and grow vegetables, how to focus binoculars or enjoy different kinds of crafts. Activities teachers had previously dismissed as unsuitable for some of their pupils, such as bird box building, became possible with thoughtful preparation and risk planning.
- With the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, project delivery successfully moved online and new ways of supporting teaching staff to deliver aspects of the programme were developed.



Making pine cone bird feeders



Live encounter with a barn owl

Case Study Rostula School

Rostula School were the winners in the best Special School category at the 2019 programme celebration event. Their Wild Idea project was to create an Eco Garden to encourage wildlife, recycling and gardening. Recycled planters (including a bath tub and sink) were installed to create spaces for wildlife to flourish.

They used recycled water bottles, reused tyres and an old water tray as planters. The students created habitats for wildlife to live, bird feeders to attract birds and planted wildflower seed to encourage pollinators too. Students fed back that it had been a positive experience throughout enabling them to develop skills, appreciation for the environment and friendships too.



Creating a school wildlife garden

Giving Young People a Voice

From the beginning, the Grassroots Challenge aimed to help give young people a voice so that their views, ideas and concerns could be heard by people in positions of power. This has involved a number of different initiatives to empower young people that evolved as the programme progressed.

Democracy Games

Twice a year, up to 45 young people went to Stormont to learn about local democratic and political structures and the UN Sustainable Development Goals. Northern Ireland Environment Link (NIEL) facilitated “Democracy Game” sessions where groups of young people came up with their own imaginary political party complete with name, strap line and manifesto promises on topics ranging from education to environmental protection. Having shared their ideas with each other, the whole group then took part in a mock election using a genuine ballot box.

“NIEL is proud to have been involved with the Grassroots Project - the determination and drive of these dedicated young people to improve our environment for their and future generations has been inspiring and a testament to how collaboration can achieve real and tangible benefits for us all.” Craig McGuicken, Chief Executive, NI Environment Link



Leah Steele receiving Young Environmental Leader Award from Ferne Corrigan

Grassroots Challenge Youth Forum

In 2017, young people were invited to establish a Grassroots Challenge Youth Forum to provide valuable feedback and ideas for the further development and improvement of the programme. The Youth Forum also took on responsibility for planning and running subsequent annual celebration events.

‘Of particular note has been the Grassroots Youth Forum. The unique skills of the Ulster Wildlife team ensured that all of the young people engaged fully with the Forum and developed further skills as a result. It is a superb example of youth participation.’ Kate Thompson, Director, Northern Ireland - Duke of Edinburgh’s Award



Youth Forum member Dara McAnulty speaking to MPs at Portcullis House, Westminster

“I have thoroughly enjoyed my time on the Grassroots Challenge Youth Forum, being with the group and the staff and how they support everyone has helped me to gain confidence in social situations. It is good to know there are other young people with similar opinions and interests in wildlife and the environment and that we can come together in the Grassroots Challenge”

Carson Gilpin - Youth Forum member/ Beechlawn Special School

Our Bright Future Youth Forum

Starting in 2017, each year two Grassroots Challenge participants had the opportunity to represent the programme on the UK-wide Our Bright Future (OBF) Youth Forum. This involved attending OBF Youth Forum meetings in England as well as the OBF annual project seminars. Additional opportunities included meeting MP's in Westminster and joining the UK OBF evaluation panel.

The Grassroots Challenge team have always been a pleasure to work with. The project has benefitted the Our Bright Future programme enormously by its open, inclusive and collaborative approach. The team is always happy to share and learn with the wider programme and has had a very visible presence at workshops, webinars, annual seminars and the Youth Forum.

Cath Hare – UK Co-ordinator Our Bright Future

Annual Celebration & Awards Event

Young people came together each year to celebrate their achievements, give out special awards, discuss current issues and gain feedback from participants. For example, in 2018 attendees were asked to identify how helping nature has helped them. The responses filtered down to five key outcomes from their participation:

- 1) An appreciation and knowledge of wildlife and environmental issues
- 2) Skills development
- 3) Making a difference
- 4) Personal development
- 5) Health and Well-being



Youth Forum members hosting the 2018 annual celebration and awards event, Craigavon Civic Centre

Our Bright Future Policy Campaign

In April 2020, Ulster Wildlife won a contract to support the Our Bright Future programme to promote 3 key policy asks in Northern Ireland. A cohort of young environmental activists and campaigners were recruited to advocate for the policy asks; more time spent learning in and about nature, more environmental jobs and a greater voice for young people in decision making. Due to the COVID-19 this work was delivered almost entirely online. Young people received training in how to talk to and lobby politicians, putting these skills into practice when they had the opportunity to meet Executive Ministers Edwin Poots and Peter Weir.

From the many, many zoom calls, one that sticks out with me was when we said what the Our Bright Future group meant to us. It was a feeling of pride, hope and ambition, treating people and the planet with utter kindness. The gratitude I have for this once in a lifetime group is beyond words; opportunities, friendships and real environmental action has come out of our teamwork and determination; this is only the beginning of what we can achieve!

Our Bright Future is exactly what it says on the tin, when we know that the planet has people in it like those we have in this group, we can be sure to have a brighter future ahead.

Emer Rafferty – Our Bright Future Youth Advocate and COP26 UK Ambassador



Youth Forum members being interviewed by the BBC regarding a proposed NI Environment Strategy

Wider Youth Voice

Inspired by the actions of Greta Thunberg, an exciting new wave of youth voice and activism emerged in the form of the Schools Strikes for Climate and Fridays for the Future movement.

Ulster Wildlife has actively supported the Youth Climate Action Network NI as well as young people from Northern Ireland Youth Forum's Environment sub group and the Belfast Climate Commission's Youth Working Group.

'Of all the groups involved in the focus groups, the Youth Forum were the most knowledgeable and empowered – replication of such work with young people is highly recommended.'

Dr Karen Kerr, School of Social Sciences, Education and Social Work, Queen's University Belfast

What we learned

The Grassroots Challenge has been one of the largest environmental youth work partnership initiatives to take place in Northern Ireland to date. There was an abundance of opportunities for learning throughout the programme and some of the key points to emerge are:

- Giving young people responsibility for designing and delivering their own projects and activities multiplies the outcomes – especially in relation to self-confidence, leadership skills, problem solving, sense of ownership, achievement and personal development.
- Working in partnership broadens the skills, knowledge, contacts and resources available to inform and deliver effectively.
- Successful celebration and awards events can consolidate personal and collective achievements as well as increasing awareness of youth engagement with the environment.
- Involvement in practical conservation work and collective action helps to promote positive health and wellbeing.
- Participating in residencies can have a lasting impact for young people on their feelings about the environment, helping to generate a desire to give back to enable other young people to have similar experiences.
- Specific skills and knowledge training about practical topics proved more popular than general awareness raising about the broad spectrum of conservation issues.
- Young people on the Youth Forum liked having project branded clothing which made them feel part of the team.
- Online participation can be both engaging and effective as well as increasing accessibility and reducing the carbon footprint of meetings and activities.
- It is vital to remain flexible and responsive to what is important for young people. This can mean that the nature of engagement work evolves to stay current – the Grassroots Challenge was able to respond to the development of youth-led activism through school climate strikes and the growing strength of the youth voice as well as recognising the value of engagement with nature for health and well-being.



Young people carrying out conservation work on the Comber Greenway with Simon King



Youth Forum members learning about bird ringing

What next

Northern Ireland faces many long-term challenges in relation to sustainable land use and farming, waste management, climate change, air, water and soil quality, biodiversity loss and access to green space. Young people have a unique role to play in addressing these challenges, bringing fresh energy and ideas along with the motivation to deliver positive change for the benefit of themselves and future generations.

However, eco-anxiety is now adding to the increasing mental health crisis amongst young people and this has been compounded by Covid-19, the impact of which also threatens future economic and employment opportunities for young people.

Ulster Wildlife believes that to address Northern Ireland's current environmental challenges, initiatives like the Grassroots Challenge are needed for fostering an appreciation and respect for nature, promotion of sustainable lifestyle choices and to support young people to gain skills for employment whilst also promoting their positive health and well-being. Whilst the National Lottery Community Fund support for the Grassroots Challenge ended in September 2021, the good news is that in partnership with others, Ulster Wildlife has been able to secure new funding to further develop and expand its environmental youth work provision. This includes:

- Financial support to continue delivery of some of the elements of the Grassroots Challenge until March 2022 (DAERA Challenge Fund).
- A contract extension for the policy advocacy work by young people (Our Bright Future).
- A contract to develop accredited Environmental and Sustainability curriculum resources for youth work settings (Education Authority Youth Service).
- A 4-year grant to run wildlife and environment themed youth residentials at Magilligan Field Centre (Binevenagh Landscape Partnership Scheme, National Lottery Heritage Fund).
- Resources to deliver a 4-year health and wellbeing focussed initiative called 'Wild Youth', to be delivered jointly with the Belfast Hills Partnership (National Lottery Community Fund's Empowering Young People programme).

It is vital that we engage younger generations in key issues that will impact their future. We have the opportunity to support the next generation to develop the knowledge, skills, and confidence to combat the dual climate and ecological emergencies and reconnect with nature for their health and wellbeing.

We will work with young people to offer opportunities to learn about nature and experience the multiple benefits it can provide. We will work in partnership with schools, businesses, and Government to prepare young people with the skills required for green jobs to support a growing green economy. We will work to ensure that nature and wildlife forms a key component of the formal and informal education systems, from primary through to higher education, so that young people are enthused and empowered to engage and take action for wildlife.



Practical work day during DofE Gold Award residential







Acknowledgments

Successful project delivery was possible thanks to the full support of all partner organisations as well as all of the participating Special Schools across Northern Ireland.

Ulster Wildlife is grateful to the National Lottery Community Fund and Our Bright Future (consortium led by The Wildlife Trusts) for initiating and funding this portfolio of youth empowerment projects across the UK, of which the Grassroots Challenge was one.

Our Bright Future

www.ourbrightfuture.co.uk

National Lottery Community Fund

www.tnlcommunityfund.org.uk

Young Farmers' Clubs of Ulster

www.yfcu.org

Duke of Edinburgh's Award / Joint Award Initiative

www.dofe.org

Lantra

www.lantra.co.uk

Keep Northern Ireland Beautiful

www.keepnorthernirelandbeautiful.org

Northern Ireland Environment Link

www.nienvironmentlink.org



Ulster Wildlife

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