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# CHANGING YOUNG LIVES



Engaging NEET young people  
in the natural environment



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## ABOUT THIS PAPER

Welcome to this paper, one in the second series of Early Findings papers. **Here we draw on the experiences of seven projects, which have all engaged young people between 13-24 years who are not in employment, education or training (NEET), or at risk of becoming NEET because they are not fully engaged with mainstream education.** It is based on the findings from projects about their work with NEET young people; it includes their experiences of what has worked and what has not worked for them, as identified through the Access to Nature self evaluation process. This is distilled into a number of key learning points about engaging NEET young people in the natural environment.

These papers are being produced across the lifetime of Access to Nature and demonstrate what is being learnt about encouraging people who have little or no experience of the natural environment to go out into the outdoors. This includes messages to inform the continuing work of Access to Nature projects and the work of other organisations interested in or committed to this kind of work. More Findings Papers will be produced as Access to Nature progresses and as we build on our learning to date.

## THE CURRENT CONTEXT

The current political agenda parallels the goals of many of the Access to Nature projects. The vision for a Big Society focuses on a belief that people should be empowered to improve their communities and shape the services they receive. The three core strands of the current Localism agenda – promoting social action in communities; empowering communities; and opening up public services – all reflect the kinds of ambitions of many of the funded projects. Within Natural England, the commitments to reconnect people with nature; protect natural assets; and maximise the opportunities offered by a greener economy are all priorities that underpin and complement Access to Nature.



As the number of young people aged 16-24 years not in education, employment or training (NEET) reaches an all-time high of just less than 1 million in England<sup>1</sup>, there is an urgent and growing interest in the strategies and approaches that successfully attract some of the most difficult to reach young people into work or learning. Research in this area has revealed that some of the most effective provision is delivered away from the classroom, through flexible, short-time courses that build a range of practical and social skills.<sup>2</sup> This describes the approach adopted by all of the Access to Nature projects referred to in this paper. With a focus on engaging young people experiencing multiple disadvantage, the projects use courses, residentials and volunteer opportunities to offer practical experiences and qualifications in conservation and the environment. These projects offer some valuable insights into the methods and approaches that successfully engage NEET young people in the natural environment; they also provide compelling evidence of how these kinds of projects, when thoughtfully managed and executed, have the potential to transform young people's lives.

### YOUNG PEOPLE WHO ARE NEET AND THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT

NEET young people are not a homogenous group. Those regarded as NEET "comprise several groups, ranging from the most disadvantaged and disengaged to those who become NEET by virtue of dropping out of a course or losing a job"<sup>3</sup>. Of most concern are the long term (over six months) NEET, who represent around 43% of the current cohort<sup>4</sup>. With multiple and complex needs, the range of issues associated with young people in this NEET sub-category comprises low educational attainment, homelessness, gang membership, early criminalisation, drug culture and dependency, care needs and teenage pregnancy.<sup>5</sup>

Research undertaken for Natural England has highlighted some of the challenges associated with engaging young people with multiple and complex needs in natural spaces.<sup>6</sup> The projects cited in this paper add to this evidence base, revealing that some young people face many barriers. Amongst these are:

- An absence of parental encouragement and support
- Reluctance to engage in new experiences in unfamiliar surroundings
- 'Territorialism' and resistance to mix with people from other areas
- Scepticism or ambivalence about outdoor activities being of value

Through Access to Nature a range of organisations have explored strategies to overcome these barriers. Their broad approaches are summarised in the following Fact Files. The paper then draws on their experiences to highlight the important features of their engagement work with NEET young people.



Project Fact File

**Name** Natural Wight

**Lead** Spectrum Medina Housing Association, Isle of Wight

**Overview** The project offers a blend of practical conservation activities and educational events designed to encourage young people and island residents to explore and enjoy their natural environment. A crucial component of the project is the creation of a positive programme to support vulnerable young people living in supported accommodation on the Island. Other partners involved include The Footprint Trust and the Isle of Wight College.

**Website** [www.spectrumhousing.co.uk](http://www.spectrumhousing.co.uk)



Project Fact File

**Name** Hastings Wild Things

**Lead** RSPCA Mallydams Wood

**Overview** Located at the RSPCA Mallydams Wood, the project employs a woodland youth worker who offers taster days, courses, residential and youth led activities for disengaged young people aged 13-19. In addition, a Young Parents Engagement Officer helps parents under the age of 25 to improve their own and their children's enjoyment of the outdoors by offering playful learning and education in the woodlands.

**Website** [www.rspca.org.uk/mallydams](http://www.rspca.org.uk/mallydams)



Project Fact File

**Name** Open Spaces Open Minds

**Lead** Connexions Partnership Kent and Medway

**Overview** A conservation based project that enables young people to gain a sense of ownership for the open spaces in their area, whilst offering practical experience and a qualification in conservation and the environment. The project delivers to young people from selected schools, colleges and academies. The project is delivered by two partner organisations: Nacro Kent and Groundwork Kent and Medway.

**Website** [www.connexionskentandmedway.co.uk](http://www.connexionskentandmedway.co.uk)

Project Fact File

**Name** call of the Wild

**Lead** circle of Life Rediscovery clc, Sussex

**Overview** The project was created to provide new learning opportunities and access to nature for young Travellers and Gypsies through woodland programmes. This work includes the delivery of three youth training programmes which are accredited via the Open College Network. Participants also receive the John Muir conservation Award at different levels.

**Website** [www.circleofliferediscovery.com](http://www.circleofliferediscovery.com)



Project Fact File

**Name** PUSHing down the barriers

**Lead** Hampshire and Isle of Wight Wildlife Trust

**Overview** created to provide young people aged 13 – 25, who are primarily NEET, with opportunities to learn about and contribute to the management of their local countryside and open spaces. Delivered in partnership with a range of agencies, the project offers practical conservation tasks and the chance to interact with others outside of the traditional classroom or workplace set-up. The project has an additional element, that of creative media, offering young people the opportunity to participate in film making, photography and website design.

**Website** [www.hwt.org.uk](http://www.hwt.org.uk)

Project Fact File

**Name** Change of Scene

**Lead** Northampton Borough Council

**Overview** The project was developed under the auspices of the Northampton East Neighbourhood Management Partnership in response to the widely expressed view that there was little for teenagers to do in Northampton East and that this led to low aspirations and motivation, weak socialisation, poor life chances and vulnerability to negative outcomes. Working initially on four deprived estates, the project engages young people in a range of sporting and artistic activities such as cycling, climbing and abseiling, nature based art and canoeing. The achievements of the young people are awarded through The Duke of Edinburgh Award, the National Indoor Climbing Achievement Scheme and the British Canoe Union.

**Website** [www.northampton.gov.uk/cos](http://www.northampton.gov.uk/cos)



Project Fact File

**Name** Green Academies Project (GAP)

**Lead** The National Trust, West Midlands

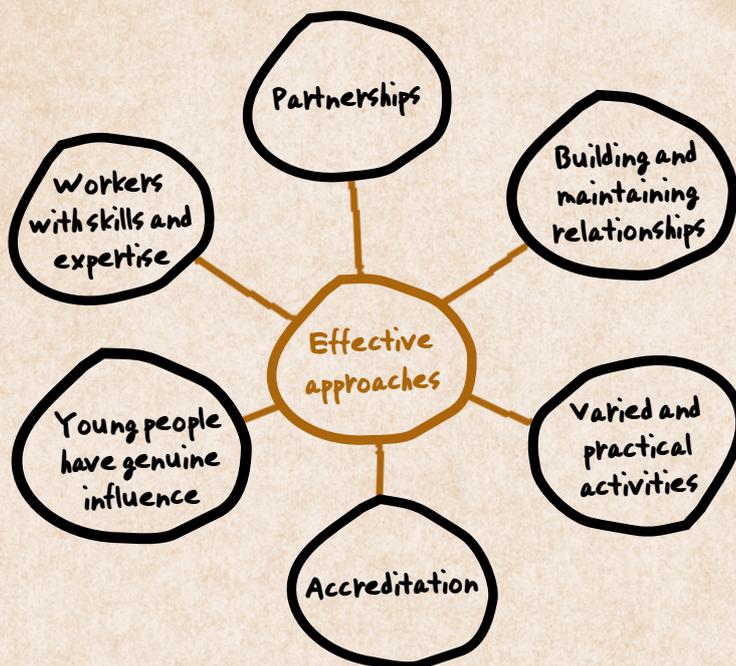
**Overview** A partnership between the National Trust, Birmingham Youth Service, Bournville college and Warwickshire Wildlife Trust. The project began with volunteer taster sessions giving 35 young people the opportunity to try out a range of practical conservation activities. Out of these sessions emerged ten committed volunteers who have carried out vital work each week on a local estate and nature reserve. The group have been taught and assessed by tutors from Bournville college, so that they can learn on the job and gain an NVQ in Practical Conservation.

**Website** [www.nationaltrust.org.uk](http://www.nationaltrust.org.uk)



**OVERCOMING BARRIERS - WHAT WORKS**

Drawing on the experiences of the seven Access to Nature projects cited in this paper, we have identified a number of important features of their approach.



## Partnerships

The benefits of organisations working together and offering an integrated response to the needs of NEET young people is well recognised.<sup>7</sup> Access to Nature projects have demonstrated the benefits associated with such a joined-up approach. Local Authorities, colleges, Connexions services, environment charities, youth offending teams, housing associations, training providers and youth and police services have come together to identify, reach, engage and retain young people in environmental activities. Examples of collaborative models that have worked particularly well include:

- **'Ambassadors'** employed by the youth service and further education college promote the project opportunities to young people (The Gap Project)
- Use of **specialist partners** to offer out-of-the ordinary activities that appeal to young people (Natural Wight)
- **Family and education support services** accompanying young people and playing an active part in outdoor activities (Hastings Wild Things)



## Building and maintaining relationships

*"We have moved to a more intensive face-to-face recruitment strategy and longer lead in times before events allowing for more team building and personal preparation."*

Change of Scene

There has been a strong emphasis on outreach work to recruit young people to the projects. Personal invitations from a trusted adult or peer have proved the most effective route for appealing to young NEETS and some interesting approaches have emerged:

- Offering **initial activities which do not *in themselves* provide 'access to nature'**. The aim is to capture the interest of young people and make a start on developing the social and behavioural skills essential for engaging in potentially hazardous outdoor activities. (Change of Scene)
- **Using images and video work** to enable young people to hear about the real and practical benefits of the project from their peers. (GAP)
- **Making use of social media and texting** to engage and maintain relationships with young people when there is no central base to meet (Change of Scene)

## Varied, practical and purposeful activities

*“They thoroughly enjoyed the practical sessions as it appealed to their largely kinesthetic style of learning.”*

Open Spaces, Open Minds

Young people are engaging in a wide range of activities ranging from one-off taster sessions through to structured volunteering. It is the practical nature of the activities that has appealed to young people. Some projects have been organised around conservation activities such as fence building, coppicing, wildlife care, ditch digging and bird-hide building, whilst others have introduced young people to outdoor sports such as rock-climbing, walking and canoeing, and bushcraft skills. There are some interesting messages emerging from these experiences:

- Young people have responded well to **facilitators and tutors who demonstrate practical skills in their profession**, such as rangers, hedge-layers or wood turners. Seeing these professionals in their own working environment can be inspiring, demonstrating to the young people how they might apply the skills they are gaining in the future (GAP)
- **Creative media** has been combined effectively with practical outdoor activities, offering young people the opportunity to participate in film making, photography and website design (PUSHing down the Barriers)
- **Conservation tasks** have been used to raise awareness of the **impacts of anti-social behaviour on nature**, such as planting a thorny hedge to protect a dormouse habitat from vandalism (Hastings Wild Things)

## Accreditation

*“I think the learning opportunities have been totally new for most of the young people, and being out of the classroom is key to the success of the programme.”*

Call of the Wild

All the projects have offered young people opportunities to improve their employability by accrediting their learning. Among the qualifications on offer have been an NVQ in Practical Conservation; John Muir Conservation Award; ABC Level 1 Award in Conservation and the Environment; Duke of Edinburgh Awards; AQA modules and NICAS Levels 1 and 2. The projects' experiences have highlighted the benefits associated with:





- Developing accreditation **opportunities that don't resemble typical 'college courses'** or formal education programmes and provide opportunities for group work (Call of the Wild)
- Using the natural environment as an **opportunity to accredit a range of skills** (not only those associated with conservation). For example, one project has turned the delivery mode for an existing NCFE Creative Crafts qualification 'inside out', by delivering the learning in an outdoor studio, and using conservation skills (such as coppicing) to collect projects materials for the final crafted product (Natural Wight).

### Give young people genuine opportunities to have influence

*"More volunteer placements will take place this Spring but this time they will be led by the current participants, who will pass on all they've learnt."*

GAP

A stand-out feature of many of the projects is the importance they place on giving young people genuine opportunities to influence and, in some cases, deliver project activities. This empowering approach demonstrates to the young people that they can make a valuable contribution and their views and abilities are valued by others. This then feeds into their self worth, contributing to a transformation in confidence and resilience. With a very practical focus, the Access to Nature projects are well suited to providing genuine opportunities for young people to contribute to their design, delivery and promotion:

- Giving young people an **opportunity to run events and activities** for their families (GAP)
- Young people **producing promotional videos** for schools and leading radio interviews (Change of Scene);
- The development of a **walk programme by young people for young people** (Natural Wight)
- **Establishment of a Youth Forum** to assist with the design of the project, help to select the new Project Co-ordination and promote the project (Change of Scene)



## Expertise and skills

“The real key to the success of the project has been the extraordinary range of skills and expertise (not least imagination and tenacity) of the Project Director. He’s a graduate youth worker with over 20 years of experience of working with young people from challenging backgrounds, plus outdoor activity skills and a youth worker training background.”

Change of Scene

The projects have demonstrated that the engagement of NEET young people requires the input of skilled and experienced staff, who understand how to build and sustain relationships with NEET young people. Projects have adopted different strategies to ensure they can offer the appropriate blend of skills:

- Working closely with partners in youth and community services (GAP)
- Recruiting co-ordinators whose primary skills are in engagement and then drawing in additional environment-based expertise when required (Natural Wight)
- Building the skills of young people through accredited youth work training so that they can make a genuine contribution to the project (Change of Scene)

## CHANGING YOUNG LIVES

There is a growing body of evidence about the benefits associated with engaging young people in the outdoors.<sup>8</sup> The experience of the seven projects cited in the report adds to this evidence base.

The benefits for young people identified by the Access to Nature projects are highlighted below.

- **Raised self-confidence, independence, self-esteem and sense of achievement.** This has been highlighted as key to other positive outcomes: as confidence grows, self-image is improved and this in turn leads to raised aspirations and refocusing on positive activities. “One of the participants who couldn’t look people in the eye before the project started, is now supervising sessions and guiding new recruits to the project! The change is overwhelming.” (GAP)
- **Improved social and communication skills,** such as getting along with others, negotiation and team working: “When the young people are doing a task it is easier to talk to them: conversation just flows naturally.” (Hastings Wild Things)



- **More positive attitude to education:** "Several of the students have become more engaged in their college work and have expressed a better understanding of the need to achieve." (Call of the Wild)
- **Taking pride in their abilities,** such as construction, woodworking, or conservation techniques: "A lot of these lads go through school being told they're rubbish, so it's amazing to see the pride they take in their work and how quickly they take ownership of the site." (GAP)
- **Improved physical health:** "It's a great way to keep fit and work out. We moved 50 logs the other day." (Natural Wight)
- **Reduced involvement in anti-social behaviour:** "Police figures show that fewer than 5% of our previous 2011 participants had been arrested over the past 12 months; the majority were previously known to the police and over half had been previously arrested." (Change of Scene)
- **Widening of horizons, developing aspirations and improving employment prospects:** "I changed from ASBO kid to youth worker and have just got paid as a play worker, earning more than anyone I know my age, on the back of my Level 2 youth work qualification with Change of Scene."

Other benefits that the project can identify include:

- **Conservation and access improvements to local green spaces:** "The country park has benefitted from a new woodland, a new set of steps and cleared paths." (Open Spaces, Open Minds)
- **Stronger partnerships** between environmental organisations, Colleges, Connexions services, youth services and other organisations working with young people.
- **Opportunities for organisations to reach a new audience** and pilot models that can be tested in other areas: "GAP shows ordinary people in ordinary communities that the National Trust is relevant to them and that it cares about them."

In summary, there are strong messages across all the projects about the benefits and impacts associated with their approach, which are consistent with other research about engaging this target group. Combined together, they make a strong case that the natural environment context has a lot to offer NEET young people.



### Tamsin's story

Tamsin, aged 16, has been an active participant in **Hastings Wild Things'** youth group at Mallydams. She has been out of formal education for over a year. Even though she struggled with school she has shown that at Mallydams she is an eager learner and ambassador for the group. She has worked hard to gain 5 AQA Unit modules, which together represent a significant educational achievement for her. On top of this she has acquired a wide range of communication and people skills, becoming the spokesperson for young people at the project Steering Group. When asked to describe her experience, Tamsin commented:..."It's a lot of fun and educational. I'd be much worse off if it wasn't for Mallydams. If I didn't go there I wouldn't be getting any kind of education at all".

Tamsin is about to start work experience at Mallydam's wildlife rehabilitation centre. She has an ambition to work with animals and although she has not had a conventional education, and may well face some challenges, she has grown in confidence and resilience in the last year.



Tamsin

### Misha's story

Joining **Call of the Wild's** Youth Training Programme earlier this year, Misha has been learning woodland and nature based skills, as part of a diverse group. As well as achieving the John Muir Award at Explorer Level and an OCN Level 1 in Woodland Skill and Nature Awareness, he has learnt to manage his feelings and gain a positive outlook for the future. In learning to work as part of a team Misha has developed effective communication skills and progressed beyond his preconditioned ideas about his own limits and his ability to find work. On finishing his training, Misha was successful in securing work with young people. Reflecting on what he gained from his involvement with Call of the Wild, Misha commented, "I really enjoyed the experience, I am looking forward to the next one. I enjoyed making fire, meeting new people, food was great. Good lessons in life."



Misha



Fran

### Fran's story

Fran, now 15, has been involved with **Change of Scene** for three years. Describing her life at the point that she joined the project, she says 'I had nothing to do, I used to get in a lot of trouble at school and on the estate'. Through Change of Scene she has gained paddlesport and rock climbing qualifications, as well as three other accredited outcomes. Describing the difference the

project has made to her life, Fran said, "I like becoming responsible and having more self discipline. I still love a laugh but know when to stop and can help other young people do the same. I have joined a girls football team, been volunteering in an old people's home and am in a group setting up a new youth club. My behaviour at school has improved and I am getting in much less trouble with the police." Chosen as a youth leader, because of her exceptional leadership qualities, Fran is now working towards her Level 2 in Youth Work Practice, and hopes to become a youth worker when she leaves school.

### Matt's story

Matt, 19 was one of **Natural Wight's** first volunteers. He joined the project through the Foyer for the Island, an organisation providing temporary accommodation and support for young people at risk. Since last summer, Matt has learnt to fell and coppice trees as part of an ancient woodland restoration, helped out on the Medina river restoration, planted an edible hedgerow and helped to create a new country park planting young elms. He completed the Green Skills NCFE qualification and discovered that he's amazing at art! Gaining in confidence month by month, Matt has been hugely influential in helping the project evolve. At a feedback session, Matt asked if he could lead a walk for other young people. He went on to design, risk assess and lead two walks, inspiring another six young people in supported accommodation to do the same. Matt completed the 26 mile Walk the Wight for charity as part of the Natural Wight team last month... an amazing achievement!



Matt

## ABOUT ACCESS TO NATURE

Access to Nature is a scheme run by Natural England and funded by the Big Lottery Fund. Natural England works on behalf of a consortium of eleven other major environmental organisations and distributes £28.75 million Lottery funding under the scheme, which has been developed to encourage more people to enjoy the outdoors, particularly those with little or no previous contact with the natural environment.

Funded projects range from local community based schemes through to national initiatives from large organisations. Diversity in scale is mirrored by a diversity and richness of projects, from equipment to allow people with disabilities to access the natural environment; supporting disadvantaged groups and those who ordinarily face barriers to visiting the countryside; as well as many projects which are providing a range of volunteering and educational opportunities for local communities and young people.

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## FOOTNOTES

- 1 Department for Education, 2011. *NEET Statistics Q4*. London: DFE
- 2 The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills, 2010. *Reducing the numbers of young people not in education, employment or training: what works and why*. London: Ofsted. Learning and Skills Network, 2009. *Tackling the NEET problem*. London: LSN
- 3 Learning and Skills Network, 2009. *Tackling the NEET problem*. London: LSN
- 4 [www.insidegovernment.co.uk/children/neet-employment/](http://www.insidegovernment.co.uk/children/neet-employment/) (accessed 5th May 2012)
- 5 Learning and Skills Network, 2009. *Tackling the NEET problem*. London: LSN
- 6 Ward Thompson, C., Travlou, P. & Roe, J. (2006) *Free range teenagers: the role of wild adventure space in young people's lives: final report*. Edinburgh: Open Space.



- 7 The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills, 2010. *Reducing the numbers of young people not in education, employment or training: what works and why*. London: Ofsted. Learning and Skills Network, 2009. *Tackling the NEET problem*. London: LSN Pring, R. et al (2009), *The Nuffield Review of 14–19 Education and Training: Final report Education for All: the Future of Education and Training for 14–19 year-olds*, Routledge
- 8 Ward Thompson, C., Travlou, P. & Roe, J. (2006) *Free range teenagers: the role of wild adventure space in young people's lives: final report*. Edinburgh: Open Space.

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## ALTERNATIVE FORMATS

Our documents are available as pdf downloads from our website, suitable for text reader technology. We may be able to provide other formats (e.g. Braille, a minority language, or large print) for special documents where there is a proven communication need.

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## PHOTO CREDITS

The pictures used in this publication have been kindly provided by Open Minds, Open Spaces, Call of the Wild, RSPCA Mallydams and other projects working on this theme.

