



NATURAL NEIGHBOURHOODS

PROTECTING GREEN SPACES AND JOBS
IN DISADVANTAGED COMMUNITIES

Green Recovery Challenge Fund



The National Lottery
Heritage Fund



Contents

Section 1: Introduction	3		
1a: Programme Overview	4		
Natural Neighbourhoods	4		
Green Recovery Challenge Fund	5		
1b: Policy Context	6		
The social and economic impact of the Covid-19 pandemic	6		
Unequal access to nature	7		
Climate and nature crisis	7		
Section 2: Aims & Objectives	8		
Section 3: Delivery Model	10		
Section 4: Results & Impacts	12		
4a: Benefits to Nature & the Environment	12		
Case studies	15		
4b: Benefits to people and communities	23		
Engaging participants	24		
Enhancing employment prospects	27		
Kickstarting green careers and diversifying the environment sector	32		
Improving health and wellbeing	32		
		Nature connectedness	35
		Benefit to communities	35
		4c: Other benefits	36
		Benefits for Groundwork	36
		Benefits for other stakeholders	37
		Conclusions	38

Section 1: Introduction

This report summarises the key impacts and learning of the Natural Neighbourhoods programme, which ran from 2021 to 2022 and was funded through the Green Recovery Challenge Fund.



1a: Programme Overview

Natural Neighbourhoods

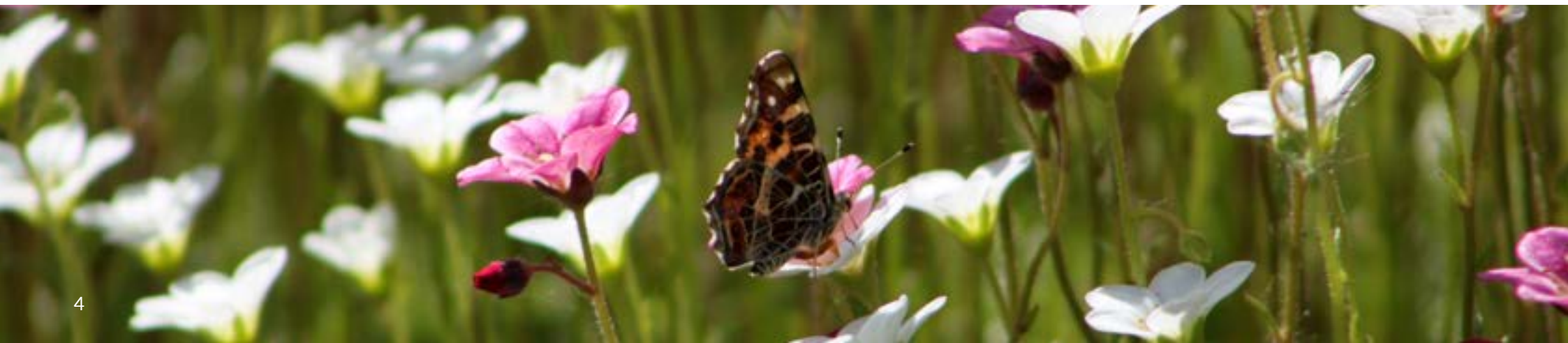
The Natural Neighbourhoods programme was designed to create environmental renewal in urban green spaces alongside the local community, building in opportunities for unemployed people to learn skills and gain work experience. It also needed to demonstrate the benefits of this approach.

An ambitious programme of urban site-based improvements created job placements for unemployed people and unlocked voluntary action on nature recovery and climate change. Numerous projects carried out urgent work to protect and enhance urban parks and green spaces in areas of the Midlands, East and North of England where Covid-19 had exacerbated health inequalities.

The programme focused on sites that matter to local communities: green spaces in towns with high levels of deprivation and country parks in urban fringe areas. Nature-based solutions included habitat enhancements, tree planting, flood alleviation and refurbishing community orchards, allotments and gardens.

The programme encouraged communities to get involved with local projects through events and volunteering. By linking with Groundwork's wider community outreach activities and local partnerships, it made these urban green spaces more visible and more accessible, helping a wider variety of people to connect with nature.

The programme began in January 2021 and ended in May 2022.



Green Recovery Challenge Fund

The Natural Neighbourhoods programme was funded by a £2.6 million grant from the Green Recovery Challenge Fund (GRCF).

The Green Recovery Challenge Fund (2020–2023) was part of the UK Government's green economic recovery, jobs and skills package in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. It aimed to sustain and build capacity in the environmental sector while delivering against the goals of the Government's 25 Year Environment Plan. It supported 159 projects across England.

The Fund covered three themes:

- Nature conservation and restoration, including ecosystem restoration and species recovery
- Nature-based solutions, particularly for climate change mitigation and adaptation
- Connecting people with nature

It was also designed to help environmental charities and their partners to recover from the pandemic.

The fund was developed by the Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (Defra), Natural England, Forestry Commission, Environment Agency and others. The National Lottery Heritage Fund distributed and monitored GRCF grants on behalf of Defra.



1b: Policy Context

The Natural Neighbourhoods programme responded to multiple challenges facing communities in the early 2020s, specifically:

- The social and economic effects of the Covid-19 pandemic
- Unequal access to nature
- The climate and nature crises

The social and economic impact of the Covid-19 pandemic

Natural Neighbourhoods was formulated in the wake of the first Covid-19 lockdown, and recognised the impact this was having on the education, employment and wellbeing of young people up and down the country.

The programme focused on disadvantaged areas in the East of England, Midlands and the North, where people were experiencing the worst social and economic effects of the pandemic.

In these communities, Covid-19 had resulted in worsened health inequalities, a significant rise in youth unemployment and an increase in mental ill-health among young people. The programme helped young people to re-engage in work, training and volunteering while doing something positive for their local areas.



Unequal access to nature

During the national lockdown, many people developed a new appreciation for the natural spaces near to where they live and saw the benefit of connecting with nature amid the stress and uncertainty of the pandemic.

But not everyone had this experience. Almost three million people in the UK do not live within a ten-minute walk of a green space, and people from ethnic minority backgrounds and those on low incomes are particularly likely to have poor access. Groundwork's 2021 **Out of Bounds** report highlighted some of the barriers that prevent people from marginalised groups from connecting with nature.

The lockdown meant that these inequalities rose up the policy agenda, and measures on green space were included in the government's flagship Levelling Up white paper. This recognised that a high quality natural environment makes a significant contribution to quality of life and pride of place in a community – something that Groundwork has seen time and time again through our environmental regeneration work.

Climate and nature crises

The need to restore the natural environment, reduce carbon emissions and adapt to the effects of climate change are goals in the Government's 25 Year Environment Plan.

Natural Neighbourhoods projects addressed these issues in many ways, from sustainable water management to ensuring thriving plants and wildlife. The programme promoted the use of nature-based solutions to increase climate resilience.



Section 2: Aims & Objectives

The overarching aims of Natural Neighbourhoods were to:

- Create environmental renewal in urban parks and green spaces that serve disadvantaged communities.
- Improve the employment prospects of unemployed people living in places suffering from the economic downturn, through structured volunteer placements, practical skills development and training.
- Help young people to enter roles in land management and environmental renewal through work placements supported by the Department for Work & Pensions (DWP) Kickstart Scheme for young people at risk of long-term unemployment.



To achieve this, the programme focused on delivering the range of benefits and outputs below. See 'Results and Impact' for detail on how these were achieved.

Outcome: A wider range of people involved in heritage

Impact

Local natural heritage is better understood, valued and protected by a more diverse range of people.

Outcome: Heritage will be in a better condition

Impact

Urban green spaces have improved levels of biodiversity and support climate change mitigation and resilience.

Outcome: People will have developed skills

Impact

The environmental sector has the skills and capacity to tackle the climate and nature emergency; communities are equipped to work more effectively with land managers.

Outcome: People will have learnt about heritage, leading to change in ideas and actions

Impact

Communities have a deeper understanding and appreciation of nature on their doorstep and are practically involved in helping to protect it.

Outcome: People will have greater wellbeing

Impact

People living in areas with entrenched health inequalities have improved their physical and mental health by regularly engaging with nature.

Outcome: The funded organisation will be more resilient

Impact

Groundwork has improved resources and relationships and is able to contribute more effectively to the long-term management of local green spaces.

Section 3: Delivery Model

The Natural Neighbourhoods programme deployed a combination of tried and tested methods from within Groundwork, which in combination delivered an intervention that was fit for purpose, responded to the circumstances in which GRCF was launched, and meant the programme was able to maximise impact within a short time period.



The core delivery elements were:

Identifying delivery locations and sites

We used our existing knowledge, portfolio of environmental improvement activities and connections with local stakeholders to identify potential locations, based on an analysis of need, opportunities for delivering outcomes, and appetite from landowners and local partners.

Working with landowners and developing plans

We consulted with local users and landowners to identify specific work schemes that could deliver environmental renewal within the programme timescale. These projects also needed to provide opportunities for trainees and volunteers to gain experience and skills, and for the wider community to engage in the natural environment.

Developing the plans meant getting written permissions from landowners and confirming maintenance agreements for 105 sites.

Deploying the Green Team model

Green Teams are our established model for carrying out environmental improvements through a team-based development programme designed to increase practical and employability skills among unemployed people. A key role in the success of the Green Teams were the supervisors; experienced practitioners with responsibility for overseeing practical activities and with the ability to train and mentor young people.

We set up 15 Green Teams within Groundwork Trusts across England. Green Teams included staff, trainees and volunteers.

Developing skills

All Green Team members, including staff, trainees and volunteers, were offered an extensive training package which put their local environmental renewal schemes in the context of global environmental issues and wider sustainability practices.

The training package offered both classroom style and practical learning covering subjects such as carbon literacy, horticulture, land management, invasive non-native species control and green and blue infrastructure. There was also certified training, for example the Construction Skills Certificate Scheme.

The trainee roles provided an invaluable opportunity for young people from a wide range of backgrounds to gain work experience. The programme also gave them practical entry-level experience in the land management and environmental sector, where there are often few work placement opportunities. Trainees were given a solid foundation for seeking future employment, and opportunities to take on leadership roles.

Natural Neighbourhoods helped create an awareness of nature connectedness among trainees, and in some cases this resulted in pro-environmental behaviour change, and communicating this message to family and friends.

A key role in the success of the Green Teams were the supervisors; experienced practitioners with responsibility for overseeing practical activities and with the ability to train and mentor young people.

Engaging communities

Employing experienced community workers (Community Enablers) ensured that site-based improvement works were visible to local people. It also allowed a wider variety of people to get involved and helped more people to access nature in their local area. This involved working with local partners, including local authorities, schools, uniform groups and other charities, and running accessible events to attract more people to the sites. Green Teams included staff, trainees and volunteers.

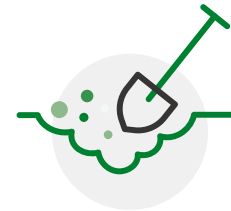
4a: Benefits to Nature & the Environment



The Natural Neighbourhoods programme has delivered the following benefits to nature and the environment:



105 site locations enhanced



1,389 hectares of land improved



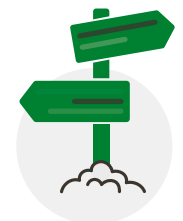
38,172 trees and shrubs planted



174,055m² of wildflowers planted



360 km of footpaths created or restored



44 new signs installed

Project Sites

Natural Neighbourhoods project sites were located in areas of need: urban spaces with scope for nature recovery activities and community engagement. In most cases, the sites were owned or managed by landowners who Groundwork already had a relationship with, allowing us to develop site plans in a condensed timetable.

The project included 105 local project sites of various sizes and types, covering a diverse range of habitats such as woodland, water, hedgerows and meadow. They included:

- > Parks (including pocket parks and Country Parks)
- > Woodlands
- > Grade II listed gardens
- > Local wildlife sites
- > Community gardens
- > Former allotments
- > Derelict sites

The types of habitat were equally diverse, demonstrating the breadth and quality of natural environments that can be found in urban settings.

Activities

Environmental improvement activities varied from large, capital improvements carried out primarily by contractors to volunteered site improvements supported by trainees. What they had in common was that they were designed for the most positive impact on the natural environment, and to support nature connectedness for local people.

A wide range of activities took place across sites, including:

- > Improvements across freshwater habitats, pond clearances and creation, reed bed management
- > Creation of woodlands, planting of orchards, urban tree planting, wet woodland and woodland management
- > Flood alleviation methods including the installation of Sustainable Urban Drainage Systems
- > Infrastructure improvements, such as accessibility improvements and signage/interpretation
- > Invasive species control and scrub clearance on heathland
- > Creation of dead hedges, habitat piles, and other habitats for wildlife
- > Seeding and plug planting for wildlife



At Pitt Street in Oldham, where residents had access to very little high-quality green space, a pocket park had been a target for anti-social behaviour and fly tipping for several years. Natural Neighbourhoods allowed the Groundwork team to work alongside the local authority to engage the community and create a flourishing space that includes a new fruit orchard, raised beds for food growing, and a seating area, inspiring community events such as planting days. Holmewood in Derbyshire had suffered neglect and lack of maintenance for over 10 years, which now has hedges laid, habitats created and repaired footpaths.

Outcomes

Whilst it is not possible to evidence the ultimate impacts of these activities in terms of biodiversity gain and/ or nature recovery within such a short space of time, each site recorded a range of intended ecological impacts. Across the portfolio this included; encouraging pollinators, attracting birds and other small mammals, supporting aquatic wildlife, habitat creation, creating wildlife corridors, and improving native biodiversity.

In addition to biodiversity gain, site-based activities resulted in two other sets of outcomes:

- > **Nature based solutions:** For example, flood management techniques including the introduction of rain garden areas to treat grey water, using fallen trees from storm damage to create leaky dams, and tree planting to increase carbon capture.
- > **Accessibility and nature connectedness:** Activities were undertaken to increase the physical accessibility of sites such as new footpaths and signage, alongside community outreach activity designed to promote the benefits of spending time in the natural environment.

Case Studies

Case Study 1: Green Patch Community Gardens, Kettering, Groundwork Northamptonshire

Green Patch Community Gardens was improved through restoration and enlargement of the wildlife pond and regeneration of the garden.

We replaced the original leaky pond with two new ponds. Creating two ponds allowed the existing fish to remain in one of the pools while the second was left fish-free to encourage amphibian and reptile species numbers to grow. This area was given the illusion of being one large body of water by installing a bridge between them.

We also improved the surrounding gardens through planting wildflower meadow turf and installing a green roofed shed to hold educational literature and pond dipping equipment.

The project directly addresses climate change through habitat creation and biodiversity enhancement. The green roof on the shed (sedum matting) serves as a demonstration model for storm water run-off reduction, and is part of an overall strategy for stormwater management on this site that is prone to water logging.

The materials for the shed, bridge and deck were sourced sustainably, using donations and leftover materials from other projects.



The original leaky pond was replaced with two new ponds



A bridge was installed between the new ponds

As well as the habitat creation and biodiversity enhancement benefits, the site is intended as an educational space to teach about aquatic wildlife. The bridge and deck have been carefully crafted to make pond dipping safe and to be accessible to wheelchair users.

Groundwork Northamptonshire has been managing and growing the Green Patch since 2007 and will continue to measure the environmental impact and to manage the site for a range of different user groups.

Ecological benefits:

- Pond restoration and enlargement: Both ponds already have plentiful aquatic insects, such as water boatmen, pond skaters and water snails. The larger amphibian pond has a number of smooth newts, frogs and vast quantities of frogspawn/tadpoles so far this spring.
- Increase insect population/storm water management: Sedum matting applied to 33m² pitched roof of wooden shelter. Stormwater management to alleviate water logging elsewhere on site. Increase of surface vegetation cover by 33m². Insect population increase 8-12% per m². Precipitation run off reduction up to 54%.
- Increase insect population/water management: Reedbed and wetland/rain garden areas form part of an ongoing water control strategy on site including further pond creation and rainwater collection/storage facility. The addition of mixed marginal plant species is expected to increase overall insect numbers.



A green roof was installed to address water logging of the site



The green roof will also increase the insect population

Case Study 2: Roch Valley, Rochdale, Groundwork Greater Manchester

This area of hedgerows and lowland meadows is a Site of Biological Importance. The project improved the site to support the future management of the hay meadow and to improve plant and insect biodiversity. The meadows have been managed specifically to encourage the spread of meadow saxifrage.

Over a kilometre of stock-proof fencing and four access gates were installed around the site. Mature hedgerows were laid and these were later gapped up with native hedgerow species, including stakes and tree guards to prevent grazing. These new hedgerows have created a continual length around the boundaries of the meadows.

We upgraded footpaths and installed wire fencing to guide users through the site and to discourage trampling, meaning that plants are able to thrive uninterrupted.

The meadow habitats were improved by introducing new methods of harvesting the grasses. A method of removing meadow grasses without the use of a tractor was introduced which aided the cutting of 'wet' areas without causing surface damage to the soil structure. The cutting, spinning and importantly the collection of hay ensures that the 'thatch' within the sward is disturbed and removed as much as possible during the process, allowing less dominant flora to colonise and increasing the biodiversity of the area.

A viewing area has been created to highlight the views along the river valley.

The Ranger team completed a series of events with young learners who were completing a low carbon careers course, explaining the benefits of the works completed to date, including flood management and the benefits of hedge laying.



A viewing area was created



Hedgerows were laid with tree guards to prevent grazing



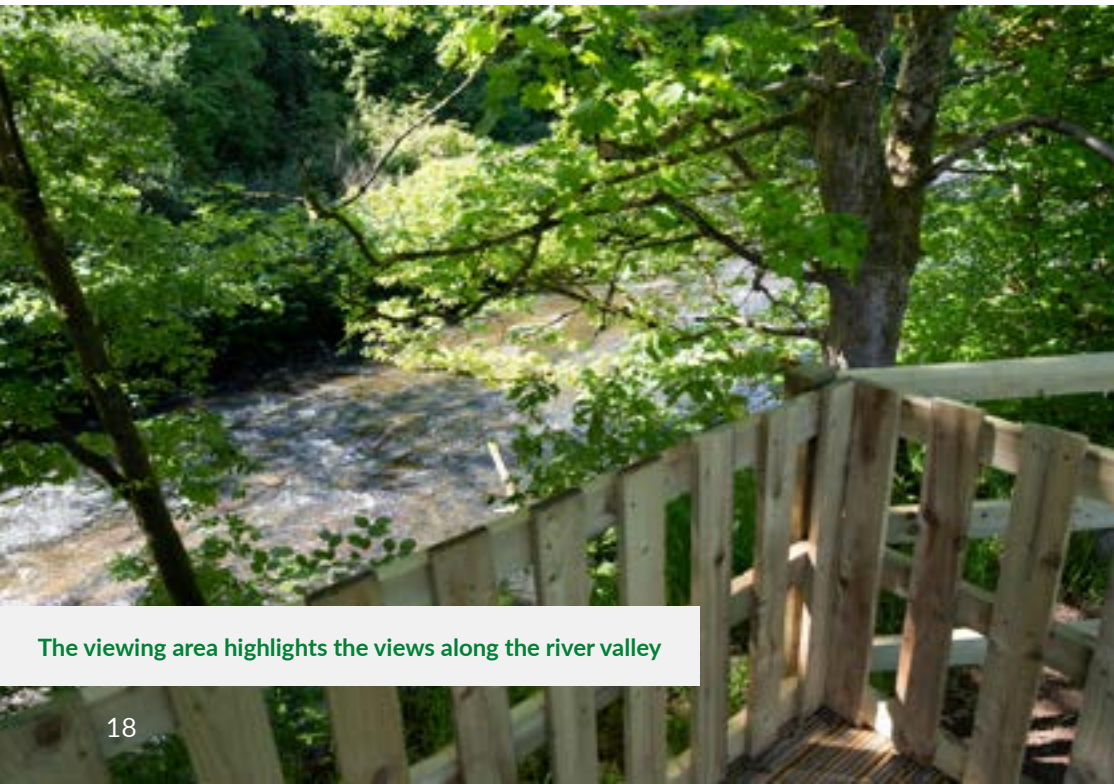
New hedgerows have created a continual length around the boundaries of the meadows

Ecological benefits:

- Restore lowland meadow and habitats: The spread of meadow saxifrage species from the original cluster is developing year on year. The new fencing and restored footpaths will help ensure the plants are able to thrive uninterrupted. The management of the meadows to encourage the spread of meadow saxifrage has also led to other species not noted before on site becoming common, such as common spotted orchid.
- Increase the biodiversity and structure of the hedgerows present on site: 380m of hedgerow was managed and/or planted across the site. New planting consisted of species such as hawthorn, hazel, holly and blackthorn to aid biodiversity of the hedgerow and provide a wider selection of cover and food sources for birds in particular.



Mature hedgerows were laid and later gapped up with native hedgerow species



The viewing area highlights the views along the river valley



Footpaths were upgraded to guide users through the site

Case Study 3: Lever Park and Terraced Gardens, Rivington, Groundwork Cheshire, Lancashire and Merseyside

This country park site includes woodlands and Grade II listed terraced gardens. It had been poorly maintained and overgrown, with existing ponds and waterways badly silted up. The project, which was match funded by the Environment Agency, focused on pond restoration and enlargement.

The project improved the appearance of one of the heritage features, an artificial cascade, by reducing sediment and pollutants from entering the Rivington Reservoir System. Works on clearance at the Ravine began with ponds being dug out and volunteers helping during the weekend Task Day. Contractors finished excavating, clearing trees and digging out all the silt from the ponds.

We created eight new pools, each cascading into another, and restored one large pond to help drain and stabilise a very marshy area. In the terraced gardens we removed silt from a further three large ponds.

Finally we created a series of small leaky dams on site to help slow the flow and create more standing shallow water.

We have also thinned out the surrounding woodland to improve light falling on the pools and pond to improve oxygenation. We planted 200 m of new hedgerow and restored a small hazel coppice. We have also created a new willow coppice area which, as well as providing a new habitat, will create an annual crop that volunteers and community members can get involved with.

Plans are in place to develop a partnership and contract with United Utilities for the management of Lever Park. We have already relaunched formal 'Volunteer Rangers' training, and a mixture of staff and volunteers will undertake ranger site patrols, litter picks and site audits around Lever Park.



New ponds and leaky dams help slow the flow of water

The project focused on the enlargement and restoration of ponds

Ecological benefits:

- Pond restoration and enlargement, “Slowing the flow”: Eight new ponds, four restored ponds, three leaky dams. We created a number of shallow pools for invertebrates, amphibians and waterfowl. We have recorded frog and toad spawn in the pools and a pair of mallard ducks are nesting on the restored pond.
- Increase the biodiversity and structure of the surrounding woodlands and hedgerows: 200 m of new hedgerow created.



Volunteers helped with digging out the ponds

Case Study 4: North Hill Court, Well-being Woodland, Leeds University, Groundwork Yorkshire

This area of woodland, small valleys and drainage channels has been unmanaged and derelict. We are now managing the mixed woodland habitat to benefit a number of species, including woodland birds, bats and European hedgehogs.

We began by improving access into the site by creating steps and footpaths and by removing litter and waste materials to make the site more attractive.

Large quantities of timber needed clearing and the old tennis courts needed breaking out.

After the initial tree felling, all the logs were kept to be used in different parts of the site, including seating, paths and soil retention. The mesh around the top tennis court was removed and site clearance started. Paths were cleared according to the plan and levelled ready for hardcore and wood to be placed. Volunteers from Leeds University joined us on each session.

Paths were laid using the remains of the court materials and the logs. A seating area was created, surrounded by a log style amphitheatre. Raised beds and planting areas were created, and bird boxes and mini-beast homes installed. A new tree, hedge and shrub understorey was planted and we removed invasive non-native plant species from the site.

Bringing the site into active management in this way has created a healthier woodland, a more diverse ecology and a better habitat for wildlife. The site has already been awarded a silver award for being a hedgehog friendly campus and has been approved as a release site for rescued hedgehogs.

We continue to work on recruiting student volunteers, and regular volunteering sessions are offered every Wednesday afternoon.



A seating area and log amphitheatre were created



Logs from trees felled at the site were used to create footpaths

Ecological benefits:

- Bringing the site into active management: Healthier woodland and more diverse ecology, providing a better habitat for wildlife. Additional native broadleaf woodland species planted, improving native biodiversity of the woodland as well as the health of the trees. This in turn will make the habitat more attractive to a variety of wildlife both in the tree canopy and in the understorey.
- Improving the health and biodiversity of the hedgerow on site: Improved the biodiversity of the hedgerow species but by doing so also created a better habitat for wildlife.
- Removal of invasive non-native plant species from the site: Increasing the opportunity for native plant species to better establish by removing INNS (including rhododendron and cotoneasters) which are likely to out-compete should lead to a more diverse shrub and woodland floor plant layer developing over time.



Steps and footpaths were installed to improve access



Large quantities of timber needed to be cleared

4b: Benefits to people and communities

The Natural Neighbourhoods programme has delivered the following benefits for people and communities:

Trainees



99 trainees recruited via the Kickstart programme



91 trainees completed training in horticulture and land management skills



47 trainees progressed straight into further training or employment

Communities



71% feel inspired to become more involved with nature and green spaces



81% feel positive about making a difference to their community



67% of people said the project helped them to have more positive interactions with members of their local community

Volunteers



4,254 community members engaged in nature connection activities



Over 35,000 volunteer hours recorded

68 trainees (68%) reported improved wellbeing

74% reported increased awareness of how nature can improve your wellbeing

76% of long term volunteers reported improved wellbeing

Engaging participants

The Natural Neighbourhoods programme was designed to engage a wider variety of people in natural heritage, by recruiting trainees and volunteers from groups that are typically under-represented in the environmental sector.

Our priorities were to:

- Target disadvantaged communities
- Create paid work placements for unemployed young people
- Develop projects in urban green spaces of importance to local communities
- Carry out community outreach activities and develop local partnerships



Interviews with participants reveal varied motivations for engaging in the programme.

- People already interested in a job in natural heritage. The programme provided valuable practical experience in a sector where this is highly valued but difficult to obtain.
- People with a preference for outdoor work. Many trainees expressed interest in work in parks, gardening or construction. They saw the opportunity to undertake training and gain experience as the best opportunity to increase their chances of finding employment at the end of the work placement.
- People with no prior interest in natural heritage, who were motivated for other reasons such as a stop gap between employment or education placements, or a way to improve employability in an unrelated field. The project provided an enjoyable and meaningful experience and an opportunity to develop, and some ended up considering work in the sector.

“I wanted to be a painter and decorator, but I’ve enjoyed this work so much I now want to look for another outdoor job.” Trainee



The programme partially delivered on its ambitions to engage a diverse range of participants. There were high levels of participation across the various project roles despite some disruption due to Covid-19 restrictions.

Evidence suggests that projects successfully engaged people from low income households, but the programme still struggled overall to attract significant numbers of participants from ethnically diverse backgrounds and people with disabilities, meaning that not all aspirations for diversity were met.

Feedback from practitioners suggests that the time limited nature of the project, and Covid-19 restrictions limited more targeted engagement activity, and were likely to be a contributory factor to limited progress in this area. This remains an area for development and would be a high priority for future initiatives of this type.



Enhancing employment prospects

Natural Neighbourhoods built on Groundwork's long experience of using the natural environment to help people get closer to the labour market through developing practical skills, working in a supportive, structured team environment and gaining a sense of achievement.

The programme worked with two distinct groups, through two different roles: trainees and structured volunteers.

Paid work placements for unemployed people aged 16–24

Groundwork employed 99 young people as trainees through the DWP Kickstart scheme. This is aimed at young people (aged 16–24 years) claiming Universal Credit and at risk of long-term unemployment. Trainees ranged from university graduates struggling for practical experience to help them find a job in the green sector, to candidates with few formal qualifications but an interest in working in practical roles.

Each placement lasted for a maximum of six months, with Kickstart paying for 25 hours a week (some Groundwork Trusts were able to top this up from other funding).

Our placement scheme was designed to maximise the experience for Kickstart trainees through:

- > Personal development plans based on individual aspirations and career goals as well as any potential barriers to longer term employment
- > Line management and supervision, and access to accredited careers support
- > A supportive team environment, working with experienced supervisors who acted as mentors
- > On the job and project-specific training, largely focused on practical skills
- > Carbon literacy and community development training, aimed at a career in the green economy
- > Structured exit support

Key achievements for this group include:

- > 91 of the trainees completed training in horticulture and land management skills
- > 47% of trainees progressed directly into further training or employment

During interviews, all trainees said they had enhanced their employment prospects as a result of their engagement with Natural Neighbourhoods, regardless of where they were in their career, what type of career they wanted or why they joined the project. While they did not all secure employment at the end of the placement, they left with new skills and increased awareness about jobs in the natural heritage sector.



Case Study: Brit – Trainee

Brit wishes to pursue a career in ecology and conservation. Despite graduating with a degree in Ecology and Biology in summer 2021, she was unable to secure employment within this field because employers require at least 12 months' experience – even for jobs advertised as graduate level. Brit was claiming Universal Credit when she saw the Natural Neighbourhoods Traineeship advertised at Groundwork in Lancashire. She recognised this as an excellent opportunity to acquire some of the experience that employers expect.

The traineeship has given Brit practical experience of conservation and she has really enjoyed working as part of a team. The experience has also improved her wellbeing as “it has given me something to do.”

She also says the placement has given her the opportunity to learn new things:

“I hadn't thought about conservation from a community perspective previously. Groundwork's mission is 'local spaces for local places'. The nicer you make a place then the more people will value and want to look after it.”

Brit is starting to look for employment but doesn't want to leave the traineeship before it is complete, to ensure that she gets the full experience. In the future she is hoping to work for a conservation organisation.

Trainees reported how the placement had offered a unique opportunity to develop a range of soft skills that were key to enhancing their employability prospects, in particular relating to working as part of a team.

“I feel a bit less anxious and more confident... I think this was just because of working with the volunteers... finding new ways to communicate.” Trainee

Trainees highlighted that the teamwork allowed them to take up leadership roles and this increased their self-confidence.

“My parents always used to call me a defeatist as they say I don't look on the positive side but working here has shown me I can make a difference.” Trainee

Significantly the sense of 'team' extended beyond the Green Team, with trainees saying that they felt integrated into Groundwork itself. Crucially this made them feel valued by the wider organisation, not just Natural Neighbourhoods staff.

“Being part of the Groundwork team and understanding how the organisation works has been really good. We attended a staff away day last week... we have felt supported by the senior management team as well as the Natural Neighbourhoods staff.” Trainee

The extensive and holistic support offered to trainees by their supervisors was crucial. At least one trainee reported being homeless during the work placement and others talked about having low self-esteem and confidence at the start of the placement. Trainees felt respected and valued for their contribution and that they were working in a non-judgemental environment.

This allowed them to feel comfortable and to experience personal growth.



Structured volunteering opportunities for unemployed adults of all ages

Groundwork Trusts recruited 515 people to work alongside trainees in structured volunteering roles. Volunteers were engaged from existing Groundwork programmes, were referred by Jobcentre Plus or other local partners, responded to calls for volunteers or committed to the project after being involved in a one-off event or activity.

Key achievements for this group include:

- > 84% of those surveyed reported improved motivation
- > 72% of those surveyed reported improved overall confidence and self-esteem
- > 67% of those surveyed reported improved team working skills
- > 53% of those surveyed reported improved communication skills
- > 93% were very satisfied with their volunteer placements

Many had volunteered for personal or health reasons and as a way to reintegrate themselves into the world. The project gave them purpose and value, a structure, social interaction and a sense of belonging. In this supportive and nurturing environment they could develop their confidence and adjust to a working environment without the pressures associated with paid employment. For others it was a way of integrating themselves into the local community or furthering their interest in nature and ecology.

Case Study: India - Regular volunteer

India is 28 and moved to Newcastle-under-Lyme four years ago. She was inspired to volunteer at Silverdale Country Park by her regular walks in the area.

The Green Team appealed to India because she aspires to work in land management and was in between jobs. It provided the opportunity to learn new practical skills in land management, including tool use and conservation, and improve her mental health. She said: "Working from home through the pandemic, the lockdowns and a stressful workload, left me feeling very isolated, stressed and anxious. Being outdoors has always helped my mental health, so this volunteering role was ideal. The most enjoyable aspects of volunteering for me have got to be being outdoors and meeting new people. This has really improved my mental wellbeing, and has given me a sense of achievement when completing tasks."

"I really enjoyed hedge laying, and learning how to identify wildlife, from trees to fungi! The skills I have learnt are also transferable - so if I move away from the area, I will still be able use everything I have learnt."

Volunteering with the Green Team has inspired India to move into the conservation sector. Following her time volunteering with Groundwork, India started a job at Keele University on a short-term sustainability project related to renewable energy and beyond this hopes to find a role at an environmental or conservation charity.

She said: "I'd like a role where I'm engaging with the public to increase their awareness and understanding of a range of environmental issues. I also want to ensure that people always have access to green spaces for their physical and mental wellbeing."



Kickstarting green careers and diversifying the environment sector

Natural Neighbourhoods, through its engagement with the DWP Kickstart scheme, attracted a younger and in some respects a more diverse workforce. Feedback from supervisory staff saw benefits in having a younger workforce, such as:

- > Bringing an energy and a positive dynamic to the team
- > The opportunity for inter-generational engagement
- > Increased capacity for manual work
- > Bringing new ideas and approaches to the table

Key achievements included:

- > Recruiting 99 trainees (despite limited referrals from DWP due to the lower than anticipated number of eligible candidates in the post-pandemic labour market)
- > 83% of trainees surveyed reported they had improved their understanding of the natural environment and links to climate change
- > Accredited training and qualifications to demonstrate readiness for jobs in the green economy

Improving health and wellbeing

The health and wellbeing benefits of spending more time in nature are well evidenced, and the Natural Neighbourhoods programme provided opportunities for people to engage in green spaces in a variety of different ways.

One of the biggest strengths of the project is the significant – and in some cases, life-changing – impact it has had on the health and wellbeing of trainees. The physical nature of the work improved their levels of physical fitness, and trainees also reported a range of different health improvements.

“I used to have cirrhosis and joint problems. It’s all cleared up and I don’t have any pain anymore.” Trainee

A large proportion of trainees also reported a significant positive impact on their mental health, increasing their self-esteem and confidence.

Case Study: Ben - Trainee

Ben, 22, from Sawtry, is a Kickstart trainee with Groundwork East.

Ben was in and out of short-term employment for three years after finishing his A-level. This experience severely impacted his mental health and gave him a negative association with work. Being part of the Natural Neighbourhoods programme has transformed his attitude.

Ben gained vast knowledge relevant to green jobs, including how to properly perform manual tasks, servicing tools, choosing and planting fauna in different settings, and foraging. As well as the practical side of the traineeship, this variety of activities has increased Ben's confidence, leadership skills and health and safety knowledge.

He particularly appreciated the support from the Groundwork team and the social side of the traineeship. He said: "My manager showed a genuine interest in my wellbeing, and my curiosity was always respected. Every colleague is kind and would take the time to thoroughly explain anything. Whether it be tools or how to use specific software, they made sure to never leave me in the dark."

Ben found the traineeship offered him the opportunity to look at himself introspectively and become the person he wants to be. He said: "I learnt how to become more assertive. I have anxiety issues that are not going to be cured there and then, but now I have an understanding about how to face them."

Ben would like to stay in the sector and is being supported by his colleagues to find work. He now has not only the solid experience required to get into work, but the drive and ambition to find a long-term role which offers progression.



Groundwork's tree planting programme in Blackpool 2022

We caught up with Groundwork's team in Blackpool, who are carrying out a huge tree planting programme. They're on target to plant over 10,000 trees this year in Blackpool alone. It's all thanks to support from volunteers and partners and funding by Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra)'s #GreenRecoveryChallengeFund.

In this film, we caught up with the team and volunteers planting trees and hedgerows on Bridge House playing field.



Grozone Short Film July 2021



Nature connectedness

Natural Neighbourhoods has helped participants (particularly trainees) gain a better understanding of nature connectedness, the impact of climate change and the value of green spaces to local communities. This has been achieved not only through formal training in carbon literacy, but through the experience of the work placement itself. This connectedness with nature also led to a connectedness with the community, with trainees feeling a sense of pride in what they have achieved and wanting to ensure the green spaces were looked after in the future.

“I didn’t care about the park before but now I know the amount of work that goes into looking after it and that I’ve been a part of it I want to look after it.”

Trainee

Benefit to communities

The involvement of local people was a critical factor in the success of the Natural Neighbourhoods programme. More than 4,200 community members engaged in nature connectedness activities since the programme began, exceeding our ambitious targets.

The role of Community Enablers was key to this success. These staff members worked hard to establish new or improve existing relationships across a wide range of communities, developing partnerships with schools, local councils, support groups, charities, guiding and scouting groups and the general public.

This has provided a strong basis for the legacy of Natural Neighbourhoods to continue, with communities being inspired to take an interest in and care for local green spaces. As seen in the following examples, community engagement activities took place alongside the Green Team activities.

Because the project sites were so diverse, users and potential beneficiaries varied too. These range from transient users such as walkers and cyclists to community group or Friends of Group members who have a more interactive relationship with the space through taking part in horticultural or food growing activities.

Common feedback from site users shows how the project increased their understanding and appreciation of their local green space either through enabling them to access it more easily, making it a more pleasant space to use or by attracting new visitors. They felt a greater sense of responsibility towards protecting and caring for the space as a result of Natural Neighbourhoods site improvements.

“I’ve noticed schools visiting the area and this has made me appreciate the multi-use of the area, how it is cared for and managed while still appearing to look natural. There also seems to be more birds about. You can now hear them and it’s quite uplifting to have a little oasis of calm.”

Community member

4c: Other benefits

Benefits for Groundwork

The Green Recovery Challenge Fund grant award was received at a time when Groundwork – like many other charities and organisations – were adjusting to a changed operating environment caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. The funding helped us to retain 44.5 frontline posts and create 15 new jobs. This provided a boost to our operational capacity at a time when our target communities were in need of additional support.

While many of the project sites were already in Groundwork's portfolio, the significant funding injection enabled us to carry out transformative activities that would otherwise have not been possible, providing increased impetus in unlocking the potential environmental gains and community benefits.

The programme has also fed into our recent policy and positioning work, helping to make the case for accessible green jobs. The **Growing Green Careers** policy report (published April 2022) featured Natural Neighbourhoods as a prominent case study, and our Kickstart portfolio of green jobs (including the 99 roles created for Natural Neighbourhoods) led to a strategic relationship with the DWP's newly formed Green Jobs team.



Benefits for other stakeholders

Natural Neighbourhoods was an opportunity for Groundwork to work with a wide range of landowners across a diverse range of sites, including local authorities, universities, housing associations and charities such as The Land Trust. While many of these were pre-existing relationships, Natural Neighbourhoods allowed us to forge new relationships with landowners in other areas. Feedback from landowners was consistently positive, commenting on:

- > Groundwork's ability to engage the wider community
- > The ability to attract additional resources and funding
- > A genuinely collaborative partnership approach
- > Increased capacity alongside the skills, knowledge and professionalism of the staff

One of the most highly valued aspects of working with Groundwork was its ability to successfully engage the wider community in developing and enhancing their local green space. Landowners provided numerous examples of Groundwork's authentic approach to community engagement and consultation, resulting in community ownership of sites that had previously been the focus of anti-social behaviour or where there had previously been a lack of community cohesion.

“Groundwork offers expertise in land and environmental management and complements the work already done by the very small Council team. Working with Groundwork has meant our land has been developed to its full potential and has allowed projects to happen that otherwise would not have.” Landowner

“I love the fact they're so inclusive and want to join agencies together to better meet the needs of the community.” Landowner

Conclusions

The Natural Neighbourhoods programme has demonstrated the potential for urban green spaces to play an important role in addressing the climate and nature emergency, while showing how involving local people can help promote nature connectedness and improve people's skills and employment prospects. All anticipated outputs have been delivered and intended outcomes achieved.

The Trainee model (made possible through the DWP Kickstart scheme) has demonstrated the benefits of creating entry-level jobs in the natural environment sector. Many participants have expressed an interest in pursuing a career in the sector, demonstrating the potential of this kind of scheme to start changing the demographics of the workforce.

Engaging more participants from ethnically diverse backgrounds, and those with disabilities, remains a challenge, and future programmes should build in greater time and focus to enable more targeted engagement through local partnerships with specialist organisations.

Groundwork was able to mobilise an ambitious portfolio of activities within a tight timescale due to an existing presence in communities, a long-standing interest in many of the sites and established relationships with landowners and other stakeholders. While this is a success story, it masks potential challenges in delivering these kinds of schemes within a compressed timescale. The injection of resources from the Green Recovery Challenge Fund was welcome but longer term, sustained funding is needed to enable more strategic decision-making and to maximise impact.

Natural Neighbourhoods has inspired participants from all walks of life to deepen their interest in the natural environment, to understand the connection to the climate crisis, and for some to consider a career in the natural environment. The Green Team model has been applied consistently across 15 locations and a range of habitat types, demonstrating replicability. If funding were available, we believe there to be opportunities for the Natural Neighbourhoods approach to be adopted in communities up and down the country, creating transformational impacts to the natural environments that matter most to communities, and life changing experiences for trainees and volunteers, who have potential to be the green workforce of the future.

Natural Neighbourhoods has illustrated the interconnections between the social and environmental challenges that the UK faces – and the value created for communities when you address them together.

GROUNDWORK

Natural Neighbourhoods: End of Programme Report

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