

GROUNDWORK

NATURAL NEIGHBOURHOODS

A BLUEPRINT FOR PROTECTING GREEN SPACES AND JOBS IN DISADVANTAGED AREAS

Natural Neighbourhoods was a large-scale programme designed to create environmental renewal in urban green spaces alongside the local community, building in opportunities for unemployed young people to learn skills and gain work experience.

PROGRAMME AIMS

The programme was designed to address three challenges: the economic and social effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, unequal access to nature, and the climate and nature crises. Its activities were concentrated in areas of the Midlands, East and North of England where Covid-19 had exacerbated existing health and economic inequalities. Through its activities, the programme aimed to contribute to the goals of the 25 Year Environment Plan and the Plan for Jobs.

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 through work placements supported by the Department for Work and Pensions Kickstart scheme

The programme was funded by a £2.6m grant from the Green Recovery Challenge Fund, administered by the National Lottery Heritage Fund, and ran from January 2021 to May 2022.

Green Recovery Challenge Fund

IMPACT

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
- 360km of footpaths created or restored
- 44 new signs installed

BENEFITS FOR COMMUNITIES:

- 4,254 community members were engaged in nature connection activities
- Over 35,000 volunteer hours were recorded
- 76% of long-term volunteers reported improved wellbeing
- 71% of community participants felt inspired to become involved with nature and green spaces
- 81% feel positive about making a difference to their community
- 67% said the project helped them to have more positive interactions with members of their local community
- 75% reported increased awareness of how nature can improve your wellbeing

BENEFITS FOR JOB CREATION:

- 99 trainees recruited via the Kickstart scheme
- 91 trainees completed training in horticulture and land management skills
- 47 trainees progressed straight into further training or employment
- 68 trainees reported improved wellbeing

LEARNING FOR FUTURE PROGRAMMES

Natural Neighbourhoods demonstrates the potential of nature recovery programmes to contribute to urban regeneration and local job creation. The approach applied here could be scaled up to benefit more communities and individuals across the UK – accelerating nature recovery, addressing skills gaps and lack of diversity in the environmental sector, boosting local economies, and improving access to nature for all.

Groundwork has identified three points of learning which could unlock the potential of Natural Neighbourhoods and bring its benefits to more communities:

- Longer term, sustained funding is needed to support a strategic approach to environmental renewal in disadvantaged communities and to maximise its impact
- To increase the diversity of the environmental workforce, green jobs programmes should build in greater time and focus to enable more targeted engagement
- The model of environmental work placements could benefit communities up and down the country through the creation of a large-scale [Youth Environmental Service](#)