

# EVALUATION OF NEW TO NATURE

**SUMMARY PROCESS REPORT**

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**WAVEHILL:**

## **SOCIAL & ECONOMIC RESEARCH**

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

New to Nature is an ambitious programme of paid work placements designed to deliver life changing career opportunities for people from underrepresented groups, whilst contributing to wider efforts to create a more diverse and accessible environmental sector.

This report seeks to summarise the processes and delivery model associated with New to Nature, highlighting the key strengths of the delivery model including the recruitment process, support offer and overall programme management and identifying recommendations for future programmes.

Please note that this report should be considered alongside the Impact Report summary which explores the impact and legacy of the programme on Trainees, Host Organisations and the wider sector.



## 1.1 Recruitment Process

Groundwork UK, alongside programme partners, developed a recruitment process that helped Host Organisations adopt inclusive practices, removing barriers for people getting into the nature sector. Key aspects included:

- Refining role descriptions for entry-level positions
- Using motivation questions instead of cover letters
- National campaign by Groundwork UK and partners
- Encouraging collaboration with local community organisations for diverse applicants
- Reviewing applications by at least two staff members to avoid bias
- Valuing relevant experience and qualifications only
- Using positive action to boost participation without favouritism
- Adjusting interview formats to meet individual needs

Developing recruitment guidance that effectively and sensitively captured the importance of positive action was time-consuming and challenging. However, as a result of this process, an effective and robust recruitment framework was developed. Detailed information on the development process and final framework is available in the Recruitment Learning paper.

- Overall, 2,546 applications were submitted for the 95 placement roles. This demonstrates the demand for and appeal of roles within the nature sector.
- Successful candidates disproportionately came from more ethnically diverse, disabled, and working-class backgrounds. This shows that the overall recruitment and selection process has met the programme's objectives.

'The first person we offered the job to did not have a university degree. They would have never had an interview with us before if we'd recruited in the normal way.'

- **Host Organisation**

- Whilst the programme effectively engaged programme priority groups, some Host Organisations reported that their rural and/or difficult to access site(s) resulted in fewer applicants from priority groups than hoped for.
- For some Host Organisations, limited candidate information in the new recruitment approach made shortlisting more difficult as, they suggested, it made it more challenging to distinguish between applicants and their perceived strengths.
- Host Organisations, Trainees and unsuccessful candidates all remarked on the positive experiences provided through engaging with the New to Nature recruitment process. Applicant's positive interactions with organisations in the nature sector will likely lead to a more favourable perception of the accessibility of careers in the field, even among unsuccessful candidates.



## 2. TRAINEE OFFER

The New to Nature programme offered an attractive placement opportunity for young people, including tailored skill development opportunities, personal budgets to reduce barriers to work (Breaking Barriers), a training budget and holistic support throughout the placement (see Figure 2.1 below).



Figure 2.1: Holistic Trainee offer

### 2.1 Trainee experience

Overall, Trainees were very satisfied with their New to Nature work placement (**86%**) and suggested the roles were enjoyable and fulfilling.

'My favourite aspect has been seeing and supporting people enjoy nature, whether that is a visitor who has come to our reserve for the first time or a placement student who is discovering the work we do at my organisation.'

– Trainee

- > Very few Host Organisations faced challenges securing suitable work for their Trainee as they typically were managing high workloads with limited capacity.
- > Trainees appreciated the learning opportunities and hands-on experience, in particular because these opportunities were in a sector they are passionate about.
- > While significant responsibilities early on were beneficial for Trainees' skill development it also resulted in some Trainees facing challenges in managing their workloads. This appeared to ease over time as Trainees become more familiar with and confident in the role.

## 2.2 Trainee support

The New to Nature programme offered a multi-faceted support system, including day-to-day supervision from Host Organisations, impartial guidance from Employment Coaches, a personal budget Trainees could access where they faced barriers to work and peer networking facilitated by Youth Environmental Service (YES).

### Host Organisation Support

The main type of support offered to Trainees by Host Organisations was via their allocated line managers or supervisors and took the form of regular meetings covering the Trainees' wellbeing and work responsibilities.

- Nearly all interviewed Trainees (99%) felt that their Host Organisations had met their support needs to some extent.
- Trainees valued frequent check-ins with their line managers and informal mentors in their Host Organisations.
- Many Trainees highlighted how approachable and open to questions their teams were, with multiple colleagues offering help whenever needed in addition to the support offered by the line manager.
- Some Trainees faced challenges with staff turnover and desired additional support to steer them towards appropriate training.



### Employment Coaches

Employment Coaches acted as impartial contacts for Trainees, offering regular reviews, career development plans, exit support, and troubleshooting. Coaches were frequently existing Groundwork members of staff with experience offering similar support on other programmes. The role was typically part-time, with staff having other substantive roles within their respective Groundwork Trust.

- 85% of Trainees felt that the support from Employment Coaches met their needs to some extent. They also valued the opportunity to access external support outside of their Host Organisation when issues arose during their placements.
- Where this support was less effective, Trainees reported that due to staff changes, they had received inconsistent support.



## Peer Support

The peer network was primarily facilitated by programme partner YES. Throughout their placement, Trainees had several opportunities to build relationships with peers from their cohort. This included:

- A face-to-face 'Building Connections and Broadening Knowledge' session at the beginning of the placement. These sessions, facilitated by YES, were perceived by Trainees as effective, allowing Trainees to meet others within their cohort and build on their existing knowledge of the sector.
- Short online training sessions, part of the 'Grow Your Career' Learning Programme, supplemented Trainees' placement experience and provided chances to gain knowledge about the wider sector and employability skills.
- Peer mentoring sessions, facilitated by YES. These sessions allowed Trainees to share experiences and support one another to overcome any challenges they faced during their placement.
- A final New to Nature celebration event where Trainees, host organisations and other stakeholders were able to meet, develop and enhance their networks and share their experiences with one another.
- The vast majority of Trainees (87%) reported that they were able to make connections with other Trainees on the programme to some extent.
- In-person meetings were crucial for fostering camaraderie and support, especially among Trainees in the same region.
- In some cases, the impact of peer connections was limited by virtual sessions, where interactions felt less personal, and geographical spread. More regional meet-ups could enhance networking.



## Breaking Barriers Fund

- The Breaking Barriers fund was designed to address barriers to work faced by Trainees (e.g. travel, equipment and clothing costs) and each Trainee had a flexible budget they could access, to the value of £250 on average.
- Across the programme, £6,433.90 was spent through the Breaking Barriers fund, with Trainees most frequently using their budget for personal protective equipment (PPE) and travel expenses.
- The additional funding was perceived by Trainees as invaluable, further demonstrating to them the importance of the New to Nature programme and its delivery model.

## 2.3 Trainee skills development

Providing Trainees with the skills and experience conducive to a fulfilling career in the nature sector was an important goal of the New to Nature programme. To facilitate this, programme partners led by Groundwork UK carefully selected Host Organisations that could offer valuable and meaningful roles. Trainees also benefitted from:

- A 'Grow Your Career' learning programme facilitated by YES and Groundwork Greater Manchester, including employment workshops and 'broadening knowledge' sessions,
- An individualised training budget that Trainees could use based on their needs and interests (e.g., driving lessons or technical courses and qualifications), and
- 'On the job' skill development. Through their varied roles Trainees developed diverse sector-specific skills and took on considerable responsibilities within their Host Organisations.

'My role has been to support so many different members of staff, so I've had that opportunity to network internally and kind of discover and explore what roles are actually available within the immediate trust, but also going to networking events.'

– Trainee

- Broadening knowledge sessions enhanced Trainees' understanding of the nature sector, but some Trainees wished for more detailed insights into specific roles and career paths.
- Trainees and Host Organisations reported that the practical experience, combined with the training opportunities offered by the programme, has made Trainees more competitive in the job market.
- Transport issues limited access to practical roles and presented barriers to skill development, especially for Trainees in rural areas. The opportunity to undertake driving lessons (where this was identified as a specific barrier to sustained employment) through New to Nature was praised by Trainees and stakeholders as it directly responds to a well-known barrier to entry into the sector.





### 3. HOST ORGANISATION OFFER

By participating in the New to Nature programme, Host Organisations became part of a network aiming to collaboratively break down barriers to greater inclusivity and diversity within the nature sector.

- As programme lead, Groundwork UK provided administrative support and guidance during the recruitment process and placement and arranged networking opportunities (Community of Practice sessions) for Host Organisations and other stakeholders to come together and learn from each other.
- Delivery partners Mission Diverse and Disability Rights UK offered training sessions on a range of subjects relating to accessibility and inclusion.
- Host Organisations could also access support via and the Employment Coaches. This included additional pastoral support for Trainees, with Employment Coaches able to relay information between Groundwork UK, the Trainees and the Host Organisations.



### 3.1 Groundwork UK support

- Administrative support from Groundwork UK was seen as valuable by Host Organisations. The programme team were praised for their flexibility and responsiveness.
- Community in practice sessions were valued by Host Organisations for providing a space to share experiences, particularly on managing Trainees with different needs, including neurodiversity and disabilities.
  - Engagement with the Community in Practice sessions decreased in the final months, and some felt that more facilitation or smaller group discussions could have enhanced networking.
- Host Organisations identified the financial support and high level of funding for entry-level roles as a key benefit of the New to Nature programme. For some the high wage subsidy was essential to their participation.
- The positive experience with the New to Nature project has led many organisations to consider future participation under a lower wage subsidy.
- Recognising the value of the New to Nature programme, Hosts commonly felt that a lower wage subsidy (around 75-80%) could be considered but may require significant efforts to find additional match funding and would be dependent on the organisation's financial situation at the time.
- 18 organisations saw some room for greater financial contributions from their side, but also raised challenges this may create.
- 5 Host Organisations said that any reduction in the wage subsidy would prevent them from participating in a second iteration of the programme.
- To further embed longer-term changes, a New to Nature Legacy Fund has been developed to support Host Organisations to progress their Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion plans and to help secure the legacy of their New to Nature experience.
- Each Host Organisation was given the opportunity to apply for further funding (based on an average budget of £750 per organisation). In total, 28 organisations successfully applied for this funding. This amounted to £10,063 being spent through the Legacy Fund.



## 3.2 Training

- Most interviewed Host Organisations (63/82) had at least some staff members, particularly line managers and HR staff, take up training offered by New to Nature delivery partners.
- Although all Host Organisations committed to undertaking training within their initial Expression of Interest form for New to Nature, a quarter of Host Organisations did not participate in any training.
  - Host Organisations often pointed to difficulties in finding the time or justifying dedicating the necessary resource to training, considering their other responsibilities.
  - A few smaller Host Organisations also suggested that the training may have been better suited to larger organisations with HR departments, and that they could not feasibly implement changes proposed in training.

### 3.2.1 Employing coaches

- Employment Coaches were intended to help Host Organisations create a supportive work environment tailored to the needs of Trainees. However, only a few Host Organisations reported engaging directly with the coaches, as their support was seen as more necessary for the Trainees themselves.
- As Host Organisations commonly asserted that they did not have the time or resource to attend training and learning opportunities, it should be considered if and how future provision could cascade learning through Employment Coaches to Host Organisations.



## 4. PROGRAMME STRUCTURE

The New to Nature programme was delivered through a collaborative partnership involving Groundwork UK, the Youth Environmental Service, Disability Rights UK, Mission Diverse, and The King's Trust.

- > Groundwork UK played a central role in overseeing the day-to-day administration and support, leading the selection of Host Organisations, managing the national promotion of placements, processing applications and providing opportunities for Trainees, Host Organisations and stakeholders to learn, network and connect.
- > Over the course of the programme, the Youth Environmental Service's role evolved, leading them to take on a more significant responsibility in delivering the Trainee learning programme and supporting peer networking.
- > Disability Rights UK and Mission Diverse primarily focused on providing training to Host Organisations and Employment Coaches.
- > Due to external factors outside the control of the programme, The King's Trust's role in delivery was reduced at the outset of New to Nature. However, The King's Trust still provided steer and expertise within the partnership.

- > The programme partnership was praised by stakeholders and Host Organisations. Management and governance of the programme was felt to be collaborative, flexible and responsive.

'Setting this up as a partnership with the Host Organisations, Groundwork UK and the delivery partners has been really valuable and it has meant that the programme hasn't felt like a funding programme, [...] It feels like a partnership within the sector trying to make change happen.'

**- Stakeholder**

- > The communications role within New to Nature was vital to disseminate key and representative messaging to the sector.



## Key strengths

There have been multiple key strengths which have underpinned the success of the New to Nature programme. These have included:

- A strong focus on its primary aim of supporting people from priority groups into employment within the nature sector. This created a cohort of well-prepared, passionate advocates who can meaningfully contribute to the sector.
- A 'test and learn' approach that allowed for ongoing adjustment and improvements to effectively respond to challenges.
- The scale of the programme, 82 organisations, diverse in mission, size and knowledge base, allowed for an environment which fostered learning and collaboration.
- Organising the programme into cohorts and encouraging Trainees to make connections within those cohorts fostered Trainees' feeling part of something bigger and provided an additional layer of support.
- High-quality and accessible placements, directly responding to the 2021 Green Jobs Taskforce Report recommendations.
- The 12-month placement duration provided considerable value for Hosts and their Trainees.
- The programme's straightforward, accessible model. This mode made it easy for Host Organisations to participate and provided the necessary support to ensure a positive experience for both employers and Trainees.



## Areas for development

Areas of development to consider for future provision include:

- Balancing the challenge for Host Organisations to improve their practices with making participation feasible, especially for smaller organisations.
- Setting clearer expectations, implementing stricter criteria, introducing mandatory requirements, and offering tiered support for smaller organisations.
- Ensuring consistency of Employment Coach support, while addressing challenges over staff turnover in this role.
- Enhancing networking opportunities for Trainees with more in-person events where possible.
- Developing a longer-term, sustained model to allow future programme iterations to benefit from established processes, streamlining implementation and improving efficiency.



## 5. KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Overall, the New to Nature pilot looked to recruit young people from priority groups to strengthen efforts to make the nature sector more inclusive and diverse. The pilot successfully recruited 98 Trainees and engaged 82 organisations in the network. The vast majority of stakeholders, Trainees, Host Organisations and Employment Coaches praised the programme, reporting that it has been well run and valuable. Programme staff and partners should therefore be commended and consider many aspects of the pilot to be an effective foundation for future provision.





## Recruitment Process

- **New to Nature priority groups are broad**, with different recruitment strategies, development opportunities and support mechanisms needed for people with different characteristics.
- Outreach activity increasingly focused on attracting disabled people and people from ethnically diverse backgrounds, as interest from people from low-income backgrounds was consistently high
- Efforts have been made to provide a tailored, rather than one-size fits all programme of development for Trainees, particularly via the allocation of an Employment Coach, and an individualised training budget
- Training content has been designed to be accessible to all, this was positively received by Trainees.
- Host Organisations, at times, found it challenging to resource the recruitment process and would have liked more detail to differentiate between applicants.



### Recommendation One

The inclusive recruitment guidance provides important information that can be used to inform recruitment approaches going forward. This guidance should be perceived as foundational for any future provision.

### Recommendation Two

Whilst the overarching application process is fit for purpose, future applications should provide additional guidance on how to answer the questions provided. This will reduce the burden on Trainees and Host Organisations.

### Recommendation Three

At the recruitment stage and beyond, programmes looking to increase the diversity and inclusivity of the sector may require additional HR expertise to reduce pressures on existing staff.

### Recommendation Four

A centralised recruitment process with greater emphasis on local outreach plans may provide capacity and efficiency benefits for smaller organisations. This may allow Host Organisations' to better reach the target audience. Future provision should consider how to retain and enhance this aspect of the programme.

## Trainee Offer

- **New to Nature Trainees reflect positively on the quality of their experience** – resulting from programme design principles that prioritise the needs and aspirations of participants. For example:
  - Insistence that all roles offer clear potential to develop skills and build a range of experiences
  - A supportive work environment, reinforced by committed line managers and appropriate supervision arrangements
  - Structured career support, including an individualised training budget, goal setting, reflective practice to capture learning, and signposting and support to progress at the end of the placement
  - 12-month placements maximising the opportunity to gain valuable experience
  - Whilst employment coaches support was highly valued by many, changes in staff resulted in a minority receiving inconsistent support.



### Recommendation Five

The wraparound support system for Trainees on New to Nature works well. Future provision should continue to offer this range of assistance to aid individuals' transition into the nature sector.

### Recommendation Six

Whilst the overarching system of support is effective, it should be considered whether the Employment Coach role would be more effective if it was a centralised, full-time role. This may ensure greater consistency and allow coaches to develop in-depth skillsets, working with programme partners, to better support a range of needs e.g. neurodiversity.

### Recommendation Seven

At the recruitment stage and beyond, programmes looking to increase the diversity and inclusivity of the sector may require additional HR expertise to reduce pressures on existing staff.





### Host Organisation Offer

- **New to Nature support for Host Organisations was effective and multi-faceted** – resulting in organisations feeling supported and able to participate in the programme.
- The programme team's proactive nature and responsiveness around queries and support given where reasonable adjustments were needed to meet a Trainee's needs was praised by Hosts.
- The high level of wage subsidy was a key factor in attracting Host Organisations and enabling smaller organisations to participate
- New to Nature training was not mandatory for Hosts, to ensure they were not overburdened. This resulted in almost a quarter of Host Organisations not participating in New to Nature training and learning opportunities.

### Recommendation Eight

Expectations for Host Organisations to engage in New to Nature's learning opportunities should be set at the outset to ensure the programme's long-term impact across the sector. The training offer should be reviewed to consider how Host Organisations' senior management could be involved with training to ensure greater drive and commitment to change. A tiered approach to Host Organisations' participation may be considered, reflecting organisations' readiness to fully engage with the programme's inclusivity goals.

### Recommendation Nine

To enhance the financial sustainability of the New to Nature funding model, a tiered wage subsidy approach should be considered. This would account for the wide spectrum of organisations comprising the nature sector and their varying financial capacities, ensuring that smaller or resource-constrained organisations receive the necessary support, while larger organisations contribute more relative to their capacity in order to advance the aims of the New to Nature programme. Any reduction in the wage subsidy should be communicated as early as possible to give interested organisations sufficient time to raise additional funds.



## Programme Structure

- The programme partnership was a crucial element of the New to Nature programme pilot.
- The collaboration was perceived as providing effective leadership and communication throughout the pilot.
- New to Nature has retained a 'test and learn' approach, instilling a flexible, responsive and innovative culture within the programme.

## Recommendation Ten

The current New to Nature partnership is an effective vehicle to drive forward the inclusivity agenda across the environmental sector. Future provision should utilise this partnership to retain learning and momentum.

## Recommendation Eleven

New to Nature provision should be extended to ensure that the benefits of the model can be fully realised, and meaningful long-term change can occur.









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