

Case Study

Find Your Future – engaging young people in nature and heritage through ‘stepping-stone’ employability opportunities

National Trust

The Vision

Find Your Future aimed to reach young people facing barriers to education and employment, creating opportunities through progressive pathways. Focusing on youth groups (11–16yrs) and young people not in education, employment or training (NEETs, 18-24yrs), the project provided countryside skills sessions, apprenticeships, traineeships, and volunteering opportunities.

Participants gained confidence, improved wellbeing, and nature connection, while developing employability skills that supported progression into further education, training, and future careers.

Key Facts

This project was created to inspire young people to connect with the South Downs, and develop estate, habitat and heritage management skills.

Working with experts, the team designed a pathway from light-touch introductions to immersive experiences, with careers and skills building at the heart of the programme.

In total, young people took up 228 opportunities across the project and wider partnership.



Countryside Skills activity – clearing scrub at Butts Brow. Credit: Megan Hughes

What we achieved

Between 2023 and 2025, 43 young people identifying as NEET participated in Countryside Skills sessions, creating pathways to other partnership activities.

Sessions were delivered at countryside sites across the project area in collaboration with Changing Chalk partners, local youth services, and other projects. Activities included practical tasks such as fence building and stile installation, habitat restoration, archaeological survey and excavation, and nature connection sessions.

The sessions held a strong focus on employability and there was opportunity for participants to ask activity leads about their employment journey, giving them a picture of what it might be like to work as a ranger or heritage officer, for example.

Participants reported increased confidence, improved wellbeing, stronger social connections, renewed motivation, and a clearer sense of purpose.

Many participants continued into youth volunteering, maintaining meaningful connections with local sites, activity leads, and partner organisations. Some also applied for apprenticeship and traineeship opportunities offered through the project, demonstrating progression into further learning and employment opportunities.

Partner organisations benefited from strengthened collaboration and a transferable framework for inclusive youth engagement.

How we did it

The project adopted a staged, 'stepping stones' approach, meeting young people at different levels of confidence and experience.

Small group sizes, flexible participation, and a trauma-informed approach created a safe and inclusive environment where trust, belonging and stability could develop, enabling young people to re-engage with learning and explore careers in conservation or heritage.

The Countryside Skills programme was delivered in four seasonal cohorts, each lasting eight weeks, combining nature conservation, archaeology, and wellbeing activities. Sessions were supported by an employability youth worker and dedicated staff, providing consistent mentoring and guidance and a personalised learning environment.

Techniques included experiential, practical learning, monthly volunteering opportunities to consolidate skills, and co-created activities shaped by participant feedback. Employability sessions including CV writing and interview skills were also offered.

Minibus transport was provided, along with bus passes for participants who needed to use public transport to get to the minibus meet-up point.

Maintaining momentum between activities and programme stages was important, so regular communication by email, text and phone supported this.

Collaboration with partner organisations enabled resource sharing and wider engagement opportunities for participants.

Lessons learnt

Success relied on building trust and creating small, safe and supportive group environments. Co-design with youth services ensured the programme remained relevant and accessible.

Maintaining consistency in people (staff) and places (sites visited) and offering flexible attendance options helped reduce anxiety for participants. Future programmes could consider taking place around a permanent 'base' – this would allow participants to become familiar with the site and build confidence.

Anxiety and poor mental health remained a significant barrier to engagement and the main cause for cancellations on activity days, with 62 instances of non-attendance across 32 sessions. We observed that word of mouth and peer-to-peer mentoring helped improve retention.

A dedicated youth worker had not been included in the original budget (as this was going to be provided by local Youth Employability Services but they no longer had capacity), so funding was subsequently identified to support this role.

Minibus transport was a high expense, sometimes with low take-up; participation increased in areas where public transport was available to participants.

“ I love being outside in nature like this... there's a lot less distraction for me. I can find it hard not to hyperfocus, being in nature helps me to relax and feel calm. ”

Find Your Future participant

The Changing Chalk Partnership

Led by the National Trust, Changing Chalk was a four-year partnership project from 2022 to 2026 working to reverse the ecological decline of chalk grassland in the eastern South Downs, bring histories to life, and connect local communities to the internationally significant landscape on their doorstep.

www.nationaltrust.org.uk/changing-chalk-partnership



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