

Case Study

Creating Connections – providing opportunities for young people to engage with nature conservation

Railway Land Wildlife Trust (RLWT)

The Vision

This work aimed to engage more young people (14 to 25 year-olds) with nature-based activities, thereby both inspiring future guardianship of the landscape, and providing skills development and wellbeing support.

Engagement also incorporated providing pathways into further green volunteering, and knowledge of green careers, particularly for those struggling with statutory education systems and academia. Alongside this, it created a community of like-minded peers, social connection and improved mental health.



Young People working on the Railway Land to create natural barriers. Credit: RLWT

What we achieved

The synergy between this aspect of the Changing Chalk project and RLWT's ongoing work with young people has resulted in reciprocal achievements. RLWT have been able to provide more varied opportunities and fabulous expertise for the young people we work with, and additional capacity provided by the Changing Chalk project has enabled us to develop new and ongoing partnerships with educational establishments and organisations working with young people.

For example, we have established a meaningful connection with the East Sussex College's 'Step Up' programme, which caters for students struggling with mainstream education. This mixed-ability group attended Spring and Summer sessions with the Chalk Life Ranger as part of their 'contributing to community' module, in which they explored the nature reserve through guided practical and creative activities, such as helping to build a chalk wildflower bank, and creating chalk/flint art with a local artist.

Many of RLWT's NatureLinks youth action participants benefitted from Changing Chalk activities, such as volunteering sessions at Landport Bottom, and the Art Trail created at Butts Brow.

Background

RLWT has a long history of working with young people, currently delivered through our NatureLinks project (funded by the National Lottery Community Fund). Engaging with young people can take time and activities offered need to be realistic about other pressures and commitments they have.

Nature connection and meaningful opportunities for action are vital to alleviate eco-anxiety, to create community, and to support wellbeing.

How we did it

In attracting young people to these opportunities, we have found several approaches helpful. Firstly, we have emphasised the different interest areas that participation will reach, such as scientific, practical, creative and media minded. This is often not obvious at first glance, and it helps to bring opportunities to life.

Secondly, we design participation, such as work experience schedules, around individual interests, abilities and other commitments, and provide a broad range of nature connection opportunities for young people to choose from.

Thirdly, we provide the means for them to further explore areas of interest, for example through free courses and collaboration with other projects. Finally, we always provide snacks!

Many of the practical sessions we have provided have taken an inter-generational approach, bringing young people together with older, more experienced volunteers. Overall, this has been a positive experience for all involved, with participants enjoying working together and sharing knowledge. Occasionally it has required careful management, with extra support sometimes needed.

“ These experiences have nurtured vital life skills such as teamwork, communication, and problem solving, all while giving our learners the joy of being outdoors and being part of something meaningful.. ”

Shane Watson, Inclusive Learning Lecturer,
East Sussex College



Further information

<https://www.railwaylandproject.org/nature-links>

Lessons learnt

Working with and understanding the needs of partnership organisations has been key. For example, educational institutions often have limited resources and set timeframes. Nonetheless, we have found that many of them recognise the value of additional, enriching nature connection experiences for their students if these can be provided within their time and resource parameters.

Building trust and getting to know young people can take time, and this is where working alongside projects such as NatureLinks, and with other providers, is really beneficial. We have been able to integrate the opportunities provided through Changing Chalk into our wider offer, and also to locate work to protect and enhance chalk grassland into a broader understanding of the local landscape.

Delivering this in the second half of the Changing Chalk project was also beneficial. We were able to spend time establishing links with Changing Chalk partners, before needing to deliver: this enabled us to respond more directly to existing community needs and opportunities.

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



Changing Chalk was made possible with The National Lottery Heritage Fund, thanks to National Lottery players. With thanks also to The Linbury Trust, players of People's Postcode Lottery, and other generous supporters.