

Natural Leaders Programme: Building Connections for Learning

[‘Natural Leaders’](#) is a two-year action research project being piloted in three areas of multiple deprivation in Scotland to develop a youth-led approach to Learning for Sustainability for young people identified as being at risk of disengaging from education.

The programme is funded by the National Lottery Heritage Fund, the Gannochy Trust and the David Doig Foundation, and was designed by the Scottish Attainment Challenge National Programme Team at YouthLink Scotland to help address clearly defined needs within the education system:

- Professor Ken Muir’s recommendations for education reform in Scotland reinforce the need for ‘values, attitudes, knowledge and skills to be significantly strengthened [across the education system] in the context of Learning for Sustainability.’¹
- We know that young people affected by poverty have fewer opportunities to learn outside and connect with nature² and there is growing evidence of the positive impact of outdoor learning on young people’s health and wellbeing and attainment.
- Following the Covid-19 pandemic, many of Scotland’s most vulnerable young people are still struggling with the return to formal education and are facing multiple barriers to learning engagement and school attendance in both primary and secondary school.



The programme is a collaboration between YouthLink Scotland, local authority youth work teams in North Lanarkshire, Perth and Kinross and West Lothian; RSPB; the John Muir Trust; and local natural heritage partners in each setting. Participating young people build relationships with youth workers who then work with local natural heritage partners to offer a range of hands-on learning experiences. Young people then create and implement their own plan of action to protect natural heritage in their chosen local greenspace.

¹ [Putting Learners at the Centre: Towards a Future Vision for Scottish Education \(www.gov.scot\)](http://www.gov.scot)

² [Children suffering due to lack of outdoor play, UK charities warn | Children | The Guardian](#)

In designing the programme, YouthLink Scotland set out to connect partners with very different sets of expertise. Youth workers are particularly skilled in engaging and supporting the hardest to reach young people – those most severely affected by poverty and wider inequalities. Natural heritage organisations bring a wealth of local knowledge and expertise about wildlife, biodiversity and the environment. The Natural Leaders programme brings these two very different sets of expertise together to create unique learning experiences for young people who are struggling to engage in the school classroom.

Evidence of impact gathered over the first year of the programme is very promising. Young people notice that they are growing in confidence to participate in new experiences, communicate more effectively with one another - and with adults - and plan and organise activities. They are showing determination to be resilient, achieve goals and influence change. Most of the young people completed awards - John Muir Awards (Discovery Level), Hi5 Awards (level 2) and Youth Achievement Awards. Feedback from schools affirms that the programme has had a positive impact on young people's confidence, communication, relationships and learning engagement:

"The pupils involved have been able to have the confidence to improve the way in which they communicate with both adults and peers."

"Pupils have shown an increased level of engagement with the activities themselves and with other aspects of school life."

A number of parents have also noticed a change in school engagement and attendance:

"At the beginning of the programme F was very shy and wouldn't speak out in a group or mix with any other pupils other than her friend G. Since attending, both girls have increased confidence and attendance at school. They will now mix with others in the group with no issues. Parents of both girls spoke with staff at the Presentation Evening and commented on the change in the girls wanting to attend school, increased motivation and better mood, and general improved wellbeing when attending school."

Youth workers tell us the programme is a positive catalyst for building relationships between youth work and schools (and in some cases with parents). And that it serves as an effective transition programme in education, supporting young people who need enhanced support as they take the step from primary to secondary school.

"Now that our relationships with these young people are established, they are more likely to access support that we can offer once they are in high school."

Our Natural Heritage partner RSPB has introduced youth work teams to the concept of 'connections to nature'. What is clear is that this programme is helping young people make a number of other important connections – to their communities, to trusted peers and trusted adults who will continue to support them as individuals and learners. It's also helping to enable productive collaboration between school and youth work and other community stakeholders.

With thanks to our funders:



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