

SHROPSHIRE HILLS YOUNG RANGERS
PROJECT EVALUATION



Introduction

Shropshire Hills Young Rangers was supported by the National Lottery Heritage Fund (NLHF) from 2020-23 and was delivered by Shropshire Hills National Landscape team, in partnership with South Shropshire Youth Forum (SSYF). The project had two strands: *Young Rangers* (YR), engaging young people aged between 12-16 and providing opportunities for personal development through conservation, outdoor learning, and adventure, and *Green Leaders*, offering young people aged 17-25 a leadership skills programme, including environmental campaigning, and representation on the Shropshire Hills National Landscape Partnership. The project was delivered by two, part-time Project Officers hosted by the Shropshire Hills National Landscape and SSYF.

Monitoring and evaluation

Project partners undertook ongoing evaluation of the project to measure the quantitative and qualitative impacts on young people. The Young Rangers project aimed to meet overarching NLHF outcomes, including:

- A wider range of people involved in heritage
- People will have developed skills
- People will have learnt about heritage, leading to change in ideas and actions
- People will have greater well-being

Throughout the project, Young Rangers staff reported increases in confidence, communication skills and environmental knowledge among young people. However, being part of a team, making new friends and exploring new places were also notable impacts. In some cases, the project was even to prove life changing.

"Before, I didn't really know what I was going to do when I finished school... now I definitely know I want to do something outside and to be involved in a larger group of people doing something bigger scale for [the] landscape."

Quantitative information on project outputs was captured through ongoing monitoring of Young Ranger sessions, recording for example, participant age, where they live, and how often they attended sessions. An activity profile for Young Rangers and *Record of Activities* was produced and these provided data on the background and level of participation among young people.

Project outcomes, including impacts on wellbeing, heritage skills, and access to local heritage was measured using evaluation methods appropriate for young people. These included:

- (i) informal discussions with young people at YR activities and events;
- (ii) training and event evaluation via questionnaires, and;
- (iii) an end of project *Creative Evaluation*, involving a collaborative film project in which young people described the project in their own words.



Young Rangers activity sessions

Young Rangers activity sessions were delivered out-of-school hours during weekends and school holidays, on a bi-weekly basis.

Participants registered on a rolling programme and were given a voice in the design and delivery of outdoor activities. When registering on the project, participants were asked to complete an 'activity menu' and having engaged with the project, were encouraged to provide as much feedback as possible via informal feedback and questionnaires.

Typically, YR sessions involved groups of around 10-12 young people and lasting around 5 hours, took place at a variety of landscapes, countryside, and heritage sites in the Shropshire Hills National Landscape (Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty).

6. Below are some of the day-to-day tasks of a Countryside Ranger. Please rate each of the theme area according to how much you'd like to take part.

[More Details](#)

■ 1 = Not bothered ■ 2 = Could be persuaded ■ 3 = Sounds ok... ■ 4 = I'm definitely interested in this
■ 5 = Super keen! Count me in!



Excerpt from the Young Rangers Activity Menu

YR activities were facilitated by project staff, sessional workers, and volunteers with specialist skills. Each summer, the programme culminated in personal development residentials in the Shropshire Hills, and further afield. In 2023, for example, two Young Rangers were selected among a shortlist for the 19th International Junior Rangers Camp in Denmark, hosted by the Europarc Federation and Fredrikshavn Kommune.



Shropshire Hills Young Rangers joined 45 other young rangers from fifteen Protected Landscapes across Europe for a week-long personal development programme, involving practical conservation, adventure, and cultural exchange.

School / College engagement

Another element of Young Rangers was engaging with schools via outreach at Bishops Castle Community College (BCCC) and Church Stretton School, for Year 7-9 pupils. With assistance from external sessional staff, 30 curriculum enrichment sessions were delivered to 52 pupils including those with special educational needs and disabilities.

The Green Leaders programme was delivered at Ludlow College of Further Education. The project aimed to facilitate a leadership group of 10 young people (aged 17-25) to address local environmental issues that they were concerned about, and via campaigns or projects, to encourage greater representation and involvement of young people in the National Landscape Partnership. Of all the project elements, Green Leaders was to prove the most challenging for a several reasons.

Firstly, was the age group. Young people in post compulsory education, training or employment proved harder to engage with as session times often clashed with study, work, or other conflicting commitments. Another barrier was location and availability of transport. 18 young people registered on the project, however these were from all corners of rural Shropshire, meaning that it was difficult to mobilise young people to meet at the same time and place. Digital engagement (e.g. via Zoom) was trialled but participation in this was low. Face-to-face, in person contact in the outdoors was the preferred context for group facilitation among young people.

Thirdly, was staff capacity. An external contractor was appointed to facilitate sessions, however, attendance among young people was low and mid-way through the programme notice was given and the contractor left for another job.

Rather than operating as two separate project strands staff were to conclude that Green Leaders would work better if it were to overlap with YR. Structured this way, YR who were older than 16 could have been offered a progression route into more focussed environmental campaigns and/or projects, via the Green Leaders programme.

Summary of Outputs and Outcomes

Outcome 1

People will have learnt about heritage, leading to a change in ideas and actions

Young people will learn about the heritage of the Shropshire Hills National Landscape and get involved in projects to conserve it at both a practical and influencing level.

Targets

- 100 young people learning more about heritage
- 100 young people achieving the John Muir Award (JMA) – a recognised environmental award
- 10 young people developing leadership and influencing roles linked to the National Landscape Partnership

Achievements

153 young people registered on Young Rangers and activities were hosted at a range of countryside and heritage sites in the Shropshire Hills. Most of these were publicly accessible sites and/or those owned by countryside service providers including National Trust, Shropshire Wildlife Trust and Shropshire Council.

Although the project exceeded the target number of young people (100), not all of those were to achieve a John Muir Award. Only 38 were to achieve the Award, however some were to achieve more than one having progressed from the Discovery level (minimum commitment of 25+ hours) through to the Explorer (50+ hours) and Conserver level



Young Rangers receiving the John Muir Award – 25/11/23 at the Shropshire Hills Discovery Centre

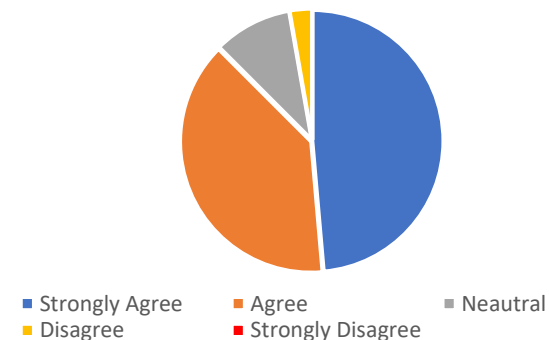
(125+ hours). Unlike, for example, Scouts or Forest School activities delivered in school, attendance on YR was not compulsory or part of a young person's weekly routine in which activities are held regularly at the same time and location. Attendance on YR sessions was sometimes sporadic as some young people attended in blocks or were to register on the programme at the start, middle or near to the end of the project.

Furthermore, young people, especially those who initially lacked confidence, were to attend as a series of taster sessions or were to 'pick and choose' between those activities that they were most interested in. For others, YR was a balancing act that they would fit in and around other weekend or holiday commitments. This meant that delivery of the John Muir Award was a challenge since the programme works best when cohorts have a definite start and finish date and when attendance is consistent, rather than flexible, over a set period.

Those achieving the JMA did so in small cohorts throughout the programme once they had met the minimum time commitment.

Of the *learning about heritage* outcome, approximately 100 questionnaires were completed and when asked whether they had 'learnt more about wildlife, landscape, and heritage' most young people responded positively, 49% Strongly Agreed and 39% Agreed.

I discovered something about wildlife, landscape and/or heritage that I didn't know before



"I feel proud to have been part of today and feel like I've made a positive contribution to my local area and the wildlife in it."

"[Young Rangers has] helped me explore the Shropshire landscape. I wouldn't have thought there was quite so many different types in such a small area."

"It felt really special as it was a chance to see something rare up close and we wouldn't have been able to do that without being in the Young Rangers."

Outcome 2

People will have developed skills

Young people will be involved a range of new practical heritage skills and life skills relevant to the outdoors such as Outdoor First Aid and navigation skills. Skills courses, some of which will be accredited leading to the 'recognition' theme, will also build self-confidence and self-esteem amongst these young people, a proportion of whom will be at risk of exclusion from mainstream education.

Targets

- 24 heritage skills courses delivered
- 100 young people with at least 3 new practical heritage skills

Achievements

Shropshire Hills National Landscape registered as a centre provider for the AQA Unit Award Scheme (UAS) which meant that the project could offer accreditation for YR and recognition for their achievements and the skills that they had learned.

The UAS programme enabled staff to deliver bite-sized, certificated sessions on a range of subjects, from hedgelaying to green woodworking, and on nature-themed topics such tree identification and bird surveys, as well as those adventurous outdoor skills, for example bushcraft, orienteering and wild food foraging. 19 UAS subjects were delivered and although this is just short of the target, several other, non-UAS certificated training events were offered throughout the project. 83 young people achieved at least one UAS certificate (161 certificates were awarded overall).

UAS enabled staff to structure sessions around clear learning outcomes and these were made accessible and appropriate for young people's needs, especially those who were home-educated or those with special educational needs or disabilities. UAS was also 'light relief' and perhaps an antidote for those young people feeling pressured by the expectations of GCSE's.



I gained new skills (e.g. working as a team, communicating with others, practical skills)



■ Strongly Agree ■ Agree ■ Neutral ■ Disagree ■ Strongly Disagree

"The best things about being involved? You do get qualifications, AQAs, that kind of stuff. You get to see people you don't usually see, do things you don't usually do, use tools you don't usually use"

"They've done so much it's really hard to remember all the projects they've done. They're always learning new skills. Every activity they do, there's something different." <Parent>

"Really enjoyed the sessions, especially talking to an expert and finding out about greenwood working apprenticeships."



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Outcome 3

People will have greater well-being

Young people benefit from spending time outside in nature - for both mental and physical wellbeing. The project will proactively work towards combatting nature deficit disorder, childhood obesity and loss of mental wellbeing for the young people involved.

Targets

- 204 days of active outdoor activity delivered with young people
- Young people reporting improved wellbeing including for example increased happiness, increased self-esteem/feeling worthwhile, increased connection to people and place, reduced anxiety.

Achievements

In total, 171 activity sessions were delivered during the lifetime of the project generating over 5.5k person hours. Young Rangers made a difference, contributing time and effort on nature restoration projects and delivering improvements to public rights of way.

One of the key ingredients of Young Rangers was to ensure that planned activities were achievable, meaningful, and fun. Many projects delivered a public benefit, for example, by improving countryside access, or helping to conserve nature and these undoubtedly provided a 'feel good factor'. Young people especially seemed to like projects with a tangible end-result where they felt they had made their mark and projects that they could take ownership of. 'Build projects', like installing rights of way furniture and countryside crafts like hedgelaying and greenwood working, were especially popular.

Positive impacts on mental and physical wellbeing were perhaps an underlying motivation for young people getting involved. As a result of COVID 19, young people are arguably more aware of mental health issues, which in part, may be due their own experiences during lockdown.



"I was nervous, really quiet, and didn't talk to anybody. But now look at me! I'm so not as shy as I was a year ago."

"Mental health is a huge issue — especially for young people. I notice that they sleep better, their heads are clearer, they haven't been on the phone all day. It's really valuable." <Parent>

"I have learnt teamwork. I'm more brave and confident than I was. I'm more open and have joined in more activities. I've taken the lead in some of them and I feel myself and I can make new friends."

Almost all the 100+ respondents were to report improvements to wellbeing (90% either Agreed or Strongly Agreed). Young Rangers also felt supported and encouraged to try new things and meet new people. They mentioned the welcoming, friendly, atmosphere of the groups, whilst parents noted the organisational effort and attention to keeping people in touch, and the focus on activities which are not just fun, but also meaningful, useful, and lasting.

I feel better for having attended. My mental and physical wellbeing have improved



■ Strongly Agree ■ Agree ■ Neutral ■ Disagree ■ Strongly Disagree



Outcome 4

A wider range of people will be involved in heritage

So called 'Nature-deficit disorder' is becoming more prevalent amongst young people as modern lifestyles make being outside and appreciating nature seemingly irrelevant to a lot of people. The young people involved will come from a range of backgrounds, all will be rurally isolated.

Targets

- 100 young people more involved in heritage
- 30+ from deprived/disadvantaged families

Achievements

Young Rangers successfully engaged a diverse young audience including those with special educational needs, ethnic minorities, and those from deprived backgrounds.

The following groups were recorded among the 153 young people who attended:

- Ethnic minorities - 12
- Special educational needs and disabilities - 25
- Home educated - 23
- Young people from socially deprived backgrounds – 12

The figures above do not include the additional 42 young people that the project engaged with via links with schools and colleges in the catchment, in Ludlow, Church Stretton and Bishops Castle. The latter involved a bi-weekly enrichment programme delivered to Year 7-9 cohorts each term, and in consultation with teachers and support staff

were designed to engage those with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND).

"You find opportunities like this don't get sent to secondary schools very often. Giving the students an opportunity to be involved in something environmental [...] And they start talking and responding to things much more effectively, which then comes back into school".
<Headteacher, Bishops Castle Community College>



"Young Rangers has been fantastic for (-). He is very dyslexic and struggles sometimes at school - so having an outlet which he is passionate about and feels he's learning new skills is brilliant. He also struggles a bit with social interactions so it's good practice to interact with other young people in a safe and caring environment".
<Parent>

Successes and challenges

One of the main successes of Young Rangers from the point of view of young people's experience was the variety of activities on offer and these were broadly categorised as (i) countryside crafts, (ii) wildlife surveys, (iii) rights of way, (iv) practical conservation and (v) outdoor skills. This meant that there was 'something for everyone' and that staff could steer activities towards those that motivated and inspired young people.

None of these activities would have been possible were it not for the involvement and support of wider project partners, especially frontline staff from Shropshire Wildlife Trust and Shropshire Council, and from dedicated volunteers. 27 volunteers, learning support staff and/or members of staff from partner organisations contributed at least x250 hours to the project, equating to approximately £5k in-kind support. The majority of these were classed as 'skilled' contributions, be they from Shropshire Council 'old' rangers providing technical support, Shropshire Mines Trust volunteers leading underground mine visits, or from learning support staff at Bishops Castle Community College.

On the other hand, appointing sessional workers for paid-for specialist support was more of a challenge. Communication with, and availability of, for example, consultant wildlife experts or outdoor activity leaders often proved difficult, and this consequently led to underspend on the ring-fenced *Professional Fees* budget. On the plus side, project staff were able to deliver around half of YR activities themselves, without the support of external providers or project partners, using their own skills, experience, and resources and without compromising the frequency, range, and variety of activities on offer.



Retention and progression of Young Rangers is also worth noting, and this is a mixed picture. Although the project exceeded the target number of beneficiaries (153) only a quarter committed to the project in the longer term but a 'less is more' approach' certainly offered the core YR groups more focussed support. Follow-up work would be needed to ascertain reasons why young people dropped-out, be it due to a lack of interest, weekend commitments or other barriers. However, we do know that some young people who entered the project in the early stages progressed into further education once they were of school leaving age.

The most popular age for Young Rangers was around 12-14. Participation was relatively lower among those aged 14+ and we can perhaps relate this to the onset and pressure placed on young people during GCSE's and other conflicting commitments in mainstream education and their daily lives.

Young Rangers was especially popular among those young people who were home-educated and parents pro-actively promoted the project among their home-education networks. Parents often coordinated car-sharing with each other to travel to project sites and travelling to remote locations was not in itself a barrier. Part of the YR appeal for both parents and home educated young people was the offer the John Muir Award and AQA Unit Award Scheme.

One of the other motivations for young people was to use YR as means of achieving the Duke of Edinburgh Award (D of E) bronze award, notably the scheme requirements to undertake *volunteering*, *physical* and/or *skills* in the community for a minimum of 3 months. Only 8 young people logged their YR contribution for their D of E. This is undoubtedly an engagement opportunity that project partners could promote more actively in the future, especially since YR delivers all three of the D of E scheme requirements mentioned above.

Overall, perhaps the main challenge of YR were delays encountered due to COVID 19. The project faced a delayed start due to the second and third lockdowns (Nov '20 – Apr '21) and whilst social distancing and digital engagement was trialled, outdoor group sessions and recruitment proved challenging until restrictions were lifted in Spring '21.

A summary of the project and legacy

Before getting involved in Young Rangers, many young people did not know what a Protected Landscape was, although when prompted, were able to name one, such as Snowdonia/Eryri or the Lake District. Protected Landscapes were associated with destinations further afield visited during holidays or school trips and most young people were unaware that they have the equivalent, right on their doorstep.

Involvement in Young Rangers has undoubtedly changed their perceptions of this, as having introduced participants to the special landscapes, heritage features and hitherto unexplored corners of the Shropshire Hills, 88% of young people reported a stronger connection with nature.

Most Young Rangers expressed the desire to continue their involvement in the project in the longer term, after NHLF funding ends. Project partners will continue to offer Young Rangers. Working with young people remains an explicit aim of the Shropshire Hills National Landscape Management Plan (due for renewal this year) and a core aim of SSYF. Partners will continue to seek external funding as well as delivering the programme using through their own resources.

In the future, partners will offer Young Rangers through core staff (albeit on a smaller scale) and via volunteers, who may be older young people, parents, or community members. It will also be possible for young people to continue practical volunteering through the Shropshire Hills National Landscape, Engagement Ranger post (commencing in Jan 2024) and via Shropshire Council's P3 (Parish Path) Partnerships and volunteer ranger groups through the Council's Outdoor Partnerships service.

Young Rangers has shed light on how project partners can best involve young people in Governance. Partners will use the experience and learning from this initial funded work to build on and continue this element beyond the funded project and by maintaining the relationships forged with schools and colleges.

Set against a backdrop of unprecedented concern for the future of the natural world manifesting itself in the declared Climate and Ecological Emergency, it is essential that young people are the present and the future champions, ambassadors, and agents of change. Project partners Shropshire Hills National Landscape and SSYF are committed to support, encourage, and inspire young people to address this challenge.





"Honestly, it's all been fantastic [...] I can't say how brilliant it's all been for him."
<Parent>

"At the beginning of the project I felt like I couldn't be myself but now I'm more open about myself and gained more confidence."

"It's a great outdoors thing to do because outdoor things like this are hard to come across, especially ones as good as this."

"I don't plan to do this as a job, but I will definitely use the skills. We don't want to let these skills die: pass them on to our kids, use them in our future, even if it's not [part of] our job."

"It's a pleasure to have the experts around, but really the true expert is yourself, because what you're doing is teaching yourself how to do stuff."

"It's just really easy for the girls to take part which means it's easier for me! It's a great project!" <Parent>

"It felt like I was really making a difference and helping to restore something. I'm proud that it might be there for another few hundred years!"

For further information visit:

<https://www.shropshirehills-nl.org.uk/our-work/projects/working-with-young-people>

<https://www.instagram.com/shropshirehillsyoungangers/>

Watch Shropshire Hills Young Rangers in their own words here:

https://youtu.be/cV0y9b_AzU4