



Avon
Wildlife Trust



Devon
Wildlife Trust



Dorset
Wildlife Trust



Somerset
Wildlife Trust



Wild Paths Evaluation Report



Nicki Brunt
Dorset Wildlife Trust
October 2022



Thanks to National Lottery players

Contents

Executive Summary	page 3
Independent Statement	page 6
Introduction	page 11
Methodology	page 12
Project Management Review	page 14
Activity Review	page 18
Who benefitted?	page 27
What worked well and why?	page 37
What didn't work well and why?	page 41
Ten years on	page 45
Legacy	page 50
Conclusions and recommendations	page 51
Appendices	page 54

Executive Summary

The National Lottery Heritage Fund (NLHF) (formerly Heritage Lottery Fund) 'Skills for the Future' funding programme was launched in 2009 with the aims of funding high quality work-based training opportunities to equip people with the skills to pursue a career in heritage, enhance the capacity of the heritage sector to deliver training and share good practice, to demonstrate the value of heritage skills to modern life and increase the diversity of the heritage workforce.

Wild Paths, a three-year inclusive traineeship programme was run by the South West Wildlife Trusts (SWWT) from 2018 to 2022 with the aim of bringing new talent and diversity to the South West natural heritage sector. This built on two previous training programmes funded through NLHF - 'Conservation Skills' developed by Dorset Wildlife Trust (2010-15), and 'Wildlife Skills' (2014-17), run through collaboration between Devon, Dorset, Somerset and Wiltshire Wildlife Trusts.

Wild Paths was awarded £501,100 from NLHF against a total project cost of £556,778, with three approved purposes:

- To deliver 30, 9-month long trainee placements in practical conservation skills, engagement skills and transferable/complementary skills.
- To deliver placements across five Wildlife Trusts: Avon, Devon, Dorset, Somerset and Wiltshire.
- To diversify the conservation workforce by providing opportunities for people from disadvantaged and excluded backgrounds.

With the aim to develop new, more diverse talent, methods to recruit people into the Wild Paths trainee placements were made as inclusive as possible and were more successful than anticipated. 605 eligible applications were received over the three years, of which 206 candidates were invited to informal, practical selection days and assessed against need, enthusiasm and aptitude. 31 candidates were successful in securing trainee placements, with one trainee moving to a related career within a month, so enabling an extra traineeship to be delivered.

77% of trainees recruited were from backgrounds traditionally underrepresented in the natural heritage workforce, for example with a disability or long-term health condition, from ethnic minority groups including People of Colour, not educated to degree level, or from backgrounds of less opportunity. At a time where recruitment into paid positions has been challenging for the sector, this level of interest in the traineeships shows a real demand for inclusive entry level opportunities and a non-academic route into nature conservation, and offers lessons to assist wider staff recruitment processes.

Two trainees were placed with each Wildlife Trust starting in September each year (2018-19, 2019-20 and 2021-22, with a year break due to the Covid-19 pandemic). Training and support were provided locally by a mentor and county project lead, and centrally by a project co-ordinator. The trainee placements consisted of an exceptional package of certified, non-certified and hands-on, work-based training. Alongside qualifications in chainsawing, brushcutting and first aid, trainees between them achieved 316 AQA Award Units. They also benefitted from gaining workplace skills, personal development and receiving support in seeking and applying for jobs.

29 of the trainees completed their training and all of these were considered 'job ready' (100%). 26 (90%) found employment within the natural heritage sector within 6 months of completing their placements, 11 (38%) within one of the host Wildlife Trusts. Two former trainees initially employed outside of the Wildlife Trusts later secured jobs within SWWT, totalling 13 (45%) who were employed by one of the host Wildlife Trusts at some point during the three-year programme.

Thus, the programme successfully delivered training that increased employability and career prospects for the trainees, with many trainees finding the opportunity 'life-changing' and 'career-defining'. With the natural heritage sector recognising its lack of diversity within its workforce and supporters, it has been valuable to find an accessible route that provides high-quality skilled employees, drawn from all parts of society, helping to fill a skills gap in the sector with people who are committed to conserving the natural heritage and ready to advocate for inclusion.

Providing training for project leads and mentors increased the skills and confidence of staff to manage and support a more diverse workforce, and the programme has increased the capacity of the sector to deliver training and share good practice. Evaluation found that this needs expanding in any future schemes, with more support for staff through further training, and resourcing/acknowledgement of the time taken across all levels of an organisation to make traineeships a success, particularly where trainees have additional needs and require extra support. The opportunity to pass on skills and knowledge and witness trainees thrive has overall been a highly enriching and rewarding experience for all staff involved.

From an operational point of view, Wild Paths worked well through having tools in place for everyone to use and the support of a central Project Co-ordinator. Collaboration and involvement of whole Trust teams enabled the creation of a more comprehensive and rewarding training package, multiplied by each Trust bringing their own unique skills, perspectives and situations to the table and giving trainees opportunities to see different working practices and organisational structures. One legacy of the programme is a Toolkit for inclusive traineeships available for Trusts and external organisations to use under a Creative Commons Licence.

Some challenges were experienced during the programme. Covid-19 interrupted the second cohort (2019-20) and required trainees to either defer or undertake 'Training at Home'. This cohort entered a less certain job market with many staff in the sector on furlough. Covid-19 also led to a year's delay in starting cohort 3 and saw a period of staff changes and loss of momentum for the programme. Although largely overcome, there were some lost opportunities for using Wild Paths to really embed and celebrate the benefits of workforce diversity at an institutional level.

Key learning and recommendations to come out of the evaluation include:

- There is a high need for entry level opportunities and a continued need to advocate for inclusive traineeships within the sector.
- Guidance needs to be clear on the criteria on which candidates are to be selected, to balance the need to find new, diverse talent, fill skills gaps and meet social need.
- Almost all candidates selected had volunteered within the sector. To be truly inclusive, taster sessions or introductory opportunities may offer more equality

to people new to nature conservation or unable to volunteer. With the considerable investment into trainees, this would also help ensure candidates have a greater understanding of the reality of the traineeship before applying, and for staff to better assess suitability, additional support requirements and potential to succeed.

- The sector would benefit from clear guidance on when a training position should become paid rather than voluntary.
- Although most trainees found employment before or soon after the end of their placements, trainees and staff agreed that a more optimal traineeship would be for a longer period of 12 months. This would enable trainees to experience all the seasons and better support organisational work programmes.
- Trainees could be regarded as being 'time-neutral' and there needs to be care they are not factored in as employees for work programming.
- Managing groups of trainees is easier than managing one or two. Joint training opportunities are greatly valued by trainees, creating a cohort support network, and needs structuring to allow a good mix of learning, social and free time. Facilitating experiences for trainees across organisations brings added value and trainees also benefit from feeling part of a team and experiencing all aspects of job roles including administration and work planning.
- Central co-ordination, and collaboration within and across teams and organisations is vital and key. More could be gained by planning in time for collaboration and discussion on common issues.
- Focused investment/setting up a 'centre of excellence' with accredited training could benefit all Wildlife Trusts/organisations in the sector. Staff time and training needs to be factored in to truly reflect the time and skills needed, especially where trainees need additional support.

Wild Paths has left a legacy through: bringing new talent and diversity to the sector, benefiting trainees, staff and organisations; enhancing the capacity of the heritage sector to deliver training and to support a more diverse workforce; testing of accessible recruitment methodology that could be applied more widely in recruitment processes; production a toolkit and film to share within the sector; and increased collaboration between Wildlife Trusts in the South West.

However, there is much more to be done to truly acknowledge, embed and celebrate the benefits of workforce diversity at institutional level. It is hoped Wild Paths and its evaluation will inspire a further concerted effort to find a way to embed many more entry-level opportunities and further Equality, Diversity and Inclusion practices into Wildlife Trusts with a vision that the workforce should reflect the society it represents and be able to better reach out to all sectors of society to help act for nature and be part of a movement to reverse the ecological and climate emergency.

Independent statement

An evaluator perspective

Heritage Insider Ltd was appointed as an evaluation advisor for the Wild Paths programme. The external evaluator has provided support and independent data collection for the life of the project, alongside the internal staff team led by the Dorset Programme Lead.

Heritage Insider has helped by:

- Providing mentoring and critical friend support to the project including advice on the focus for the project evaluation and key evaluation questions
- Creating, reviewing and refining evaluation approaches and tools, updating case studies from trainees and facilitating reflective practice with the mentors and individual Wildlife Trust senior teams, and interviewing key stakeholders and surveys with partner Leads and Wild Paths Coordinators.
- Providing opportunities for key stakeholders to consider what's gone well, what's been challenging and how plans have been adapted in response to challenges using qualitative research techniques
- Crystallising lessons learnt that can inform future traineeships.

Nicki Brunt (Programme Lead for Cohort 3, Dorset Wildlife Trust) has led on the evaluation of the programme in its final stages, and has written a Final Evaluation report in Dorset Wildlife Trust's role as lead partner. This summarises what was delivered, what difference this made, and lessons learnt. This Independent Statement has been written to accompany the programme report and provide an independent perspective on the achievements of the project, evaluation process and the legacy the project is leaving behind for the nature conservation sector.

The final evaluation has shown the benefits of taking a **qualitative and exploratory approach** to evaluating traineeships and organisational benefit from programmes such as Wild Paths, alongside the more formal structure of trainee diaries and reviews. Evaluative approaches such as this that should be considered when planning future similar projects and traineeships.

Furthermore, the three successive traineeship schemes run across the South West Wildlife Trusts (and by sub-sets of these) provided an opportunity to look back across 119 traineeships, delivered over a 12-year period. **Longitudinal evaluations** of this kind concerning engagement or training within the nature conservation sector are rare, and those based on a set of quality data are even rarer. The final evaluation of the Wild Paths project gave the chance to examine, in the long-term, what difference do inclusive traineeships make to individuals undertaking them, and also to the organisations hosting?

Making change happen

Heritage Insider supported the Wild Paths Coordinator to develop a **Theory of Change approach**. This put the evaluative emphasis on the project as a journey and stepping stone to attaining the vision, rather than a set of stand-alone project deliverables. The following page comprises an updated Theory of Change that maps out how Wild Paths made a difference to trainees, partner Wildlife Trusts and the nature conservation sector. Thoughts on potential longer term outcomes are noted in the final columns of the Theory of Change. This has been constructed through review of the evaluation data and reflections of a range of stakeholders.

How inclusive traineeship schemes made a difference

	Started by...	So that...	And then...	This could lead to...
Trainees	<p>Gaining a better understanding of what a role in nature conservation can offer and what the day-to-day job entails</p> <p>Reflecting on the role they would ideally like to have post-traineeship</p>	<p>Trainees built their confidence to operate effectively within the Wildlife Trust and become valuable members of the team</p> <p>Trainees developed skills and experience to equip them for careers in nature conservation</p> <p>Trainees attain relevant qualifications or 'tickets'</p>	<p>Trainees develop the social capital, sector knowledge and qualifications needed for future roles</p> <p>Trainees from diverse backgrounds bring new talent into the nature conservation workforce by securing their first roles</p>	<p>Previous trainees become sector leaders and advocating for inclusive workforce practice</p>
Wildlife Trusts	<p>Testing ways of attracting candidates from a wide range of backgrounds and removing barriers from the application process</p> <p>Processes and protocols are developed and stress-tested for effectively onboarding and managing trainees</p> <p>Staff developing coaching and leadership skills</p> <p>Mentors developing an understanding of how to support the individual needs of their trainees to help them thrive</p>	<p>Fresh energy and a 'buzz' was created by trainees in departments and across the Trust</p> <p>Staff are trained, more knowledgeable about and confident discussing and delivering good workforce diversity practice</p> <p>Mentors and those closest to the project benefit from satisfaction of helping trainees on their journey</p> <p>Additional capacity in teams is gained for tasks e.g. where lone working is not appropriate</p> <p>Provided a 'stepping stone' from volunteering into employment</p>	<p>Wildlife Trusts have an 'interview-ready' pool of high quality candidates for vacancies</p> <p>Project staff and participants act as allies within the natural heritage workforce</p> <p>Wildlife Trusts recognise and acknowledge the benefits of workforce diversity</p> <p>Wildlife Trusts begin to embed and celebrate the benefits of workforce diversity</p>	<p>Each Wildlife Trust to have best practice Equality, Diversity and Inclusion practice in their workforce, especially regarding early career opportunities</p> <p>Fully embed paid inclusive early career traineeships into the organisational structure</p> <p>Developing a pre-early career programme to support candidates before they are ready to apply for a traineeship</p>
The Nature Conservation sector	<p>Gaining a collective awareness of the need for a more diverse workforce</p>	<p>Organisations have a focus on Equality, Diversity and Inclusion in their workforce and engagement work</p>	<p>Organisations begin to develop mechanisms to deliver this in their day-to-day work</p> <p>Project partners share the Wild Paths model and lessons learnt</p>	<p>The Wild Paths partnership to advocate for active inclusion in the sector</p> <p>Develop clear sector standards on when early career positions should be paid</p> <p>Developing a 'Centre of Excellence' with coordination, quality assurance and accredited training that can be used across partners and wider nature conservation organisations</p> <p>The make-up of the nature conservation workforce reflects society</p>

Career-defining impact

Central to the Wild Paths programme was the desire to develop new, more diverse talent to enrich the nature conservation sector. To this end, 77% of trainees recruited were from backgrounds **traditionally underrepresented** in the natural heritage workforce, for example, with a disability or long term health condition; from ethnic minority groups including People of Colour; not educated to degree level or from backgrounds with less opportunity. Wild Paths attracted 605 eligible applications over the three years, 206 candidates were invited to at least 1 selection day and 31 traineeships were delivered.

This is in sharp contrast with the low numbers of applicants (and subsequent labour shortage) currently being experienced for many paid positions in the sector. It shows the need for, and desirability of, funded trainee positions and leaves the question: Are there any lessons learnt from Wild Paths about accessible recruitment and creating attractive roles for the contemporary workforce¹ that Wildlife Trusts can transfer to wider recruitment processes?

The programme was successful at preparing trainees for the next step on their career journey with 100% of those completing their placement being considered as **job ready** before or by the end of the placement. In addition to a range of practical skills essential for securing jobs in nature conservation such as health and safety, brushcutter use, crosscutting and chainsaw maintenance, trainees developed vital workplace skills such as team working and personal organisation. Collectively trainees attained a staggering 316 AQA qualifications in addition to on-the-job and online certified training.

Traineeships have **significantly increased the career prospects** of trainees and their **employability** within the sector. This is evidenced by 90% of Wild Paths trainees having secured employment within six months of completing their placement. 11 trainees have been retained within the South West Wildlife Trusts.

Trainees, both past and just completing their traineeship, speak passionately about the value of the experience they have had as part of Wild Paths and the predecessor schemes. For individuals the scheme leaves a legacy not just about learning skills but about feeling welcome for who they are and part of a team, understanding how to get things done in an organisation, feeling confident and heard.

Wild Paths has been **career-defining** for trainees who may have struggled to get into the sector otherwise. The majority of whom continue to professionally grow and flourish within the sector. The impact and value of this opportunity cannot be underestimated.

¹ There are a number of studies documenting changes in workforce preferences in the UK, especially in the wake of the Covid-19 impact, for example:

<https://www.ucl.ac.uk/bartlett/environmental-design/news/2021/dec/how-has-covid-19-changed-our-expectations-workplace-wellbeing>

<https://www.westfieldhealth.com/blog/employee-expectations-in-the-post-covid-world-over-half-will-prioritise-more-time-with-their-loved-ones>

<https://www.acas.org.uk/employer-poll-working-practices-after-covid-19-june-2021/html>

<https://www.theaccessgroup.com/en-gb/hr/resources/hr-transformation/how-have-your-employees-expectations-changed-in-the-past-few-months/>

Furthermore, the benefits have extended to mentors and those closest to trainees. The opportunity to help manage and guide trainees has been '**career affirming**', has helped to refine their own practice and recognising of their role in the sector for **nurturing new talent**.

An organisational learning journey

Wild Paths has benefited individual Wildlife Trusts and contributed towards organisational resilience, for example by:

- Identified and developed ways to surmount **major barriers** to people from non-academic backgrounds, from diverse backgrounds and those with less financial resources from accessing careers in their organisation
- Created new **capacity for management** and development of staff with diverse needs
- Added extra capacity for tasks that could not be completed otherwise, for example, those that cannot be done alone
- Provided '**interview-ready**' candidates for the job recruitment process.

Wild Paths has also benefited the South West Wildlife Trusts as a partnership, for example by:

- Given a **focus for collaboration** across South West Wildlife Trusts
- Provided **central coordination**, training opportunities, project and funder management and evaluation
- Provided **leverage** for medium to long-term funding
- Represents a concerted effort to **reinforce the nature conservation workforce**
- Added a **significant dimension for trainees** to be able to see how other organisations work.

Wild Paths has been a learning journey for all of the Wildlife Trusts involved. Ten of the key lessons learnt are summarised below:

1. **Staff time across the Trust is needed to support traineeships** - include realistic Full Cost Recovery for staffing costs (including management) in any future funding bids
2. **The traineeships are not true 'entry level'** - consider how the traineeships can be built upon with other opportunities e.g. a series of 'tasters' or a six-week intro
3. **9-months is not the optimal length for a traineeship** - Trainees miss out on seeing the fruition of their work due to seasonality and the Trust does not get best benefit from recruited, inducted and skilled-up trainees in the team. Plan future traineeships as 12 months or longer
4. **It is beneficial for trainees to see how work gets organised** – schedule 'office days' to allow time to go through Management Plans etc and invite to big team meetings
5. **Trainees should not be treated as employees when work programming** – overall they are 'time neutral' to the Trust
6. **Some trainees need additional support** – factor in resource for this and train those managing them before they arrive in the skills they may need
7. **The partnership offers more opportunities for collaboration but this needs planning** – for example, partners could be convening 'think tanks' on common issues pertinent to traineeships, inclusion in the workplace, workforce diversity and entry-level opportunities
8. **It is easier to manage more trainees rather than less** – because they support each other, more staff get involved across a wider range of work packages and input to their experience etc.

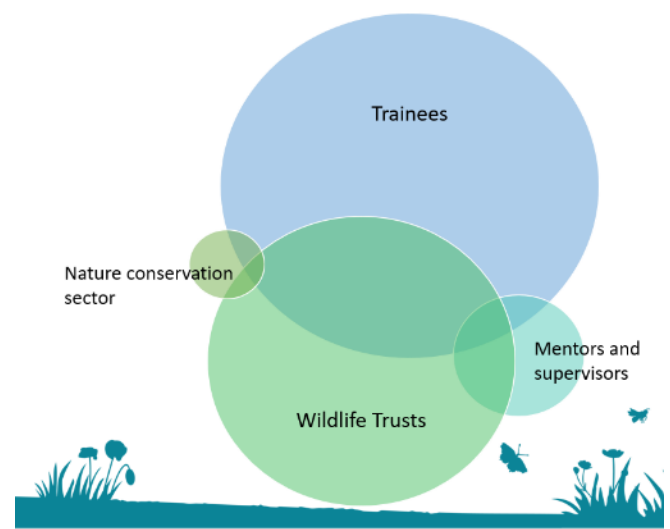
9. **Central coordination and support is vital** – this reduces the work for individual Wildlife Trusts, provides grant management and increases the quality of experience for trainees
10. **Ensure clarity on programme aims/ communicate this regularly** - is it primarily there to broaden workforce diversity or fill a skills gap?

Conclusion

This project has successfully made a tangible, and often career-defining difference to early career professionals but also benefitted mentors and supervisors, the host organisations and the sector. The Venn diagram (right) shows the overall relative balance of this benefit to each of these beneficiary groups.

The ultimate goal of Wild Paths was defined as ‘At institutional level acknowledge, embed and celebrate the benefits of workforce diversity’.

Wild Paths has undoubtedly made a valuable contribution to diversifying the sector workforce by providing strong ‘proof of concept’ for inclusive entry-level opportunities. However, like the rest of the nature conservation sector, there is work still to be done for the partners to achieve this ambition.



Wild Paths is part of the Wildlife Trust journey to being more inclusive but the task is a big one, and the journey will be long. The sector (and individual NGOs) could usefully apply the Lawton principle² to inclusive traineeships – early career opportunities and programmes need to be bigger, better, more joined-up if we are to build a modern workforce more relevant and representative of the society at large that we are ultimately relying on to help solve the joint biodiversity and climate crises.

‘Business as usual’ is not an option and we need collective thinking to work through issues such as disrupting the traditional model of extensive volunteering being one of the main routes to employment in the sector, how to advocate for inclusion and influence EDI practice across organisations and how to move from ‘project-based’ investment in early career opportunities to them being ‘just the way we do things’. The sector needs think tanks, focussed investment, centres of excellence and many, many more inclusive traineeships and later career mentoring opportunities to work through this particular issue.

However, the prize is worthwhile in bringing in new perspectives, helping develop relevance with a wider range of people to break out of the ‘green bubble’ of existing audiences, fresh ideas and providing an ‘investment-ready’ solution to the skills crisis.

² J.H., Lawton & Brotherton, Peter & V.K., Brown & C., Elphic & A.H., Fitter & J, Forshaw & R.W., Haddow & S., Hilbourne & R.N., Leafe & M.P., Southgate & Sutherland, William & T.E., Tew & J, Varley & G.R., Wynne. (2010). Making Space for Nature: A Review of England's Wildlife Sites and Ecological Network.

Introduction

The National Lottery Heritage Fund (NLHF) (formerly Heritage Lottery Fund) 'Skills for the Future' funding programme was launched in 2009 with the aims of funding high quality work-based training opportunities to equip people with the skills to pursue a career in heritage, enhance the capacity of the heritage sector to deliver training and share good practice, to demonstrate the value of heritage skills to modern life and increase the diversity of the heritage workforce.

In 2010, Dorset Wildlife Trust (DoWT) identified major barriers to people from non-academic backgrounds and those with less financial resources from accessing careers in nature conservation. DoWT designed the Conservation Skills training programme which was awarded £351,400 from NLHF (total project cost £415,350) to deliver training placements for 31 individuals between 2010 and 2015. 27 out of the 31 trainees had entered employment in the sector within 1 year of leaving their placement, with the remaining 4 volunteering in the sector or in further training (one not in sector). Mentor and employer feedback was overwhelmingly positive.

To build on this experience, four Wildlife Trusts, Devon (DeWT), Dorset, Somerset (SWT) and Wiltshire (WWT), working collectively under the South West Wildlife Trusts umbrella (SWWT), developed a programme to offer a range of local placements to tackle further skills gaps in the workforce and to diversify the natural heritage workforce. In 2014, the partnership was awarded £829,000 from NLHF (total project cost £1,075,200) towards a three-year project 'Wildlife Skills – Training for a Career in Nature Conservation'. Through this, 57 placements were delivered in 4 cohorts: in practical conservation (26), volunteer and community engagement (13), education and engagement (8), monitoring and survey (4) and 6 combining these skills. By the end of the programme (2017), all of the 46 trainees in the first 3 cohorts had gained employment in the sector with 4 out of 11 from cohort 4 already in employment, 3 in further training, and 4 volunteering and looking for work less than 6 months after the programme finished.

Recognising the continued lack of diversity in the natural heritage sector, and extending the partnership to include Avon Wildlife Trust (AWT), the SWWT then developed the Wild Paths programme with the aim to bring new talent and diversity to the South West natural heritage sector, focussing on the key skills that are required to enable effective conservation management of the natural environment. In order to support the diversification of the natural heritage workforce, 30 traineeships were to be offered and targeted at those facing barriers to entering the sector including those from socially excluded backgrounds, young people and people without higher level education qualifications but with a strong aptitude for practical nature conservation. This programme was awarded £501,100 from NLHF (total project costs £556,778).

Methodology

This evaluation report has been put together by Nicki Brunt, Wilder Communities Manager at Dorset Wildlife Trust and Dorset Programme Lead/line manager for the Project Co-ordinator for Cohort 3. Nicki has previously evaluated The Great Heath project funded by NLHF following NLHF guidance. Nicki has been guided and supported by Kate Measures, Technical Lead for Research, Evaluation and Engagement Design at Heritage Insider.

It was defined in the original application that overall success of the project would be based on the following four key indicators:

1. Effectiveness of recruitment
Target – 50% of participants are from excluded backgrounds
2. Number of Trainees Completing the Training Programme
Target – 30 candidates complete training programme
3. Number of Trainees classed as 'Job Ready'
Target – 100% of participants
4. Employment of Successful Trainees
Target – Offer employment opportunities to 3 successful candidates within the partnership
Target – 75% of participants completing the programme find suitable employment in the sector within 6 months of completion

Heritage Insider was appointed to support the evaluation process in 2018 and worked with the project co-ordinator to consider 'Theory of Change' methodology for Wild Paths. Through this, an evaluation framework was created and the ultimate goal of Wild Paths was defined as 'At institutional level acknowledge, embed and celebrate the benefits of workforce diversity'. Six intermediate outcomes were identified as:

1. Wild Paths participants from diverse backgrounds will bring new talent into the nature conservation workforce
2. Wild Paths participants will develop skills and experience to equip them for careers in nature conservation
3. Wild Paths SWWT Project staff will develop coaching & leadership skills
4. Staff working within the 5 Wild Paths partner Trusts will be more knowledgeable about and confident discussing workforce diversity
5. Staff working within the 5 Wild Paths partner Trusts and Wild Paths participants will be able to act as allies within the natural heritage workforce
6. The Wild Paths partnership will advocate for active inclusion in the nature conservation sector.

Heritage Insider further supported the evaluation process towards the end of the final year undertaking the following:

- Reflective practice in the form of project learning reviews for:
 - Trust senior teams (offered to all Trusts but undertaken with Dorset (N= 6), and Somerset (N= 4) (see Appendix 1)

- Mentors (6 participants) (see Appendix 1)
- Survey to collect feedback from Leads from each partner (N=4)
- Telephone interviews with Coordinators (N=2)
- Longitudinal interviews with past trainees to update case study examples.

SWWT also carried out the following as part of the evaluation:

- Recording of background data for all individuals applying to the Wild Paths (see Appendix 2)
- Reflection of the aims of the Wild Paths scheme to bring new talent into the sector and diversify the workforce and sharing of experiences and learning points as part of a two-day training camp session for staff at the end of cohort 1 (attended by 12 of the 18 project staff team) (see Appendix 3)
- Feedback on residentials at Folly Farm and Kingcombe Meadows Farm, and a general feedback session, Cohort 1 (see Appendix 4)
- A reflective session with trainees at their Kingcombe residential, Cohort 2 (N=7) (see Appendix 4)
- A reflective session with trainees at their final Kingcombe residential, Cohort 3 (N=10) (see Appendix 4).
- Feedback forms after a selection of external training sessions (see example in Appendix 5)
- Trainee exit interview sheets (N=12) (see Appendix 6)

Throughout the programme, trainees were asked to record their experiences in a monthly journal to reflect on their training and, every three months, review their training with their mentor. Information was also gathered through trainee's blogs and articles.

Project Management Review

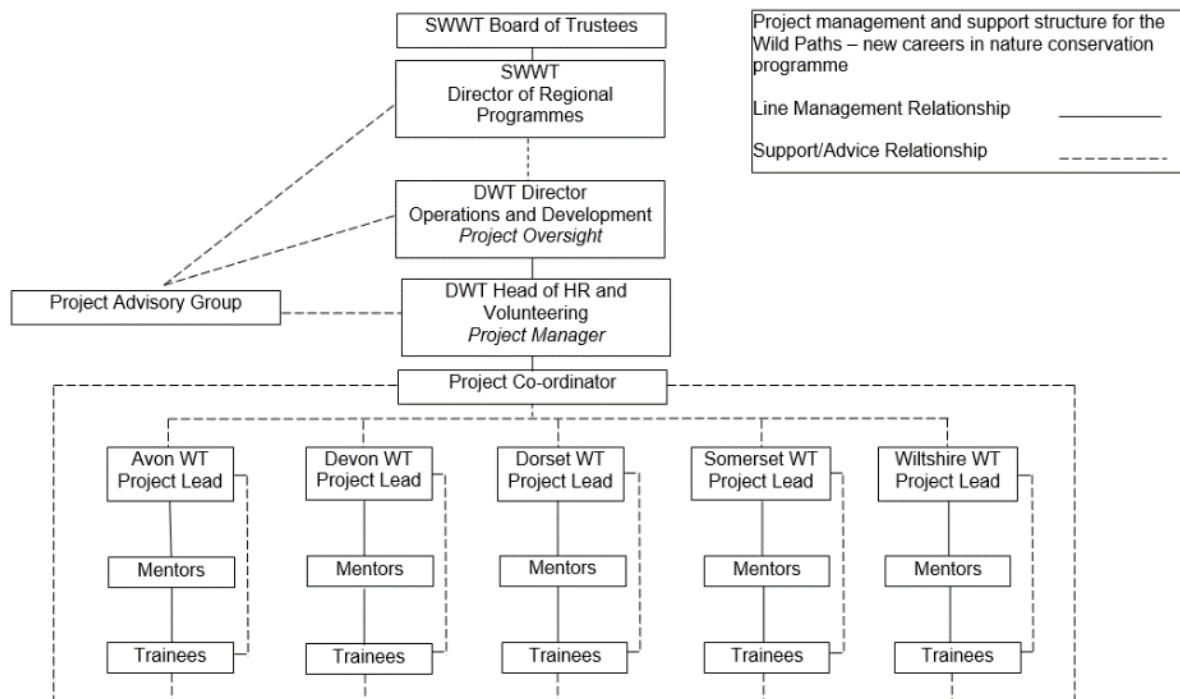
Management structure

Responsibility for project oversight, was initially shared by the SWWT Director of Regional Programmes and DoWT Director of Operations and Development. When the post of SWWT Director of Regional Programmes finished, the DoWT Director of Operations and Development (who became Chief Executive of DoWT) took sole responsibility for project oversight, showing a benefit to allocating two people to this position to ensure good continuity.

The Project Manager and Dorset Project Lead roles were fulfilled by DoWT staff, who also line managed and hosted the Project Co-ordinator. Four further Project Leads in each of AWT, DeWT, SWT and WWT completed the project team and Steering Group. The Steering Group met once or twice per year, with the Project Co-ordinator facilitating communications between these meetings. In most Trusts, financial support staff also assisted with programme reporting to NLHF.

Within their Trusts, trainees were supported by individual mentors (or, occasionally, 2 mentors) in the first instance, and then by their Trust Project Lead. The Project Co-ordinator played a key role centrally in supporting trainees, including pastoral care, emotional support, and provision of centralised training. Any matters of HR or Health and Safety beyond day-to-day management were referred to Project Oversight/Project Manager for advice and to ensure a consistent approach across Trusts.

The project management structure is shown in the organogram below:



Throughout the period of the programme there were considerable changes of staff, which at times caused disruption to the programme. The original Project Co-ordinator moved to a new role at DoWT in 2021 and a new Co-ordinator was appointed for the final cohort, supported by a new Dorset Lead to add project management capacity. The new Co-ordinator then gained a conservation role within DoWT in March 2022 but, wishing to ensure continuity for the trainees and their development, remained working for the project 2 days/week with the addition of administrative support 2 days/week for the remainder of the project. Both Co-ordinators received glowing feedback from staff and trainees alike:

‘The organising has been great. The Co-ordinator has been amazing and is on my “top human” list.’
(Trainee Cohort 1)

‘The Project co-ordinator has been fantastic at providing loads of opportunities for training beyond what I would have thought to pursue on my own, but which has been invaluable in my search for a job and in daily life.’
(Trainee Cohort 3)

Project Leads also changed in Devon, Avon, Wiltshire and Somerset at different stages of the programme, alongside several changes in mentors, some mid cohort. With regards to the training programme, sufficient experience remained on the Steering Group to support the newer staff in delivering the programme consistently.

A delay in starting the final cohort by a year due to Covid-19 did, however, exacerbate impacts of staff changes whilst Trusts were re-finding their feet in delivering the programme. Focus became a little watered down as staff had many competing priorities trying to manage their own work programmes under pandemic restrictions and periods of uncertainty. This led to some momentum being lost in taking opportunities for partnership working, for example on advocacy during the last two years of the project.

‘Collaboration – did what needed to do for the programme. Didn’t do more.’
(Staff stakeholder)

Overall, feedback from the learning reviews and partner surveys indicates that the SWWT collaborated extremely well over Wild Paths both internally between departments and between Trusts, with excellent information sharing, efficient applicant selection process and beneficial residential for mentors. The programme has also led to more collaborative working in other ways e.g. through HR.

‘There has been a collaborative and supportive approach by all concerned with the delivery of both initiatives which has meant our Trainees have formed an integral part of our conservation team. They were also welcomed into other departments within the organisation. Some participants needed additional support. This was provided internally by the mentors, the project lead HR and the Safeguarding team and externally by the Steering Group and other mentors.’

‘Excellent. Having a central coordinator and training program made a world of difference. Trusts doing traineeships individually would be considerably less impactful.’

‘There was good collaboration between the 5 Trusts involved in our programme, and relationships between these Trusts has developed further as a result of the programme.’

(Staff stakeholders)

Income and expenditure

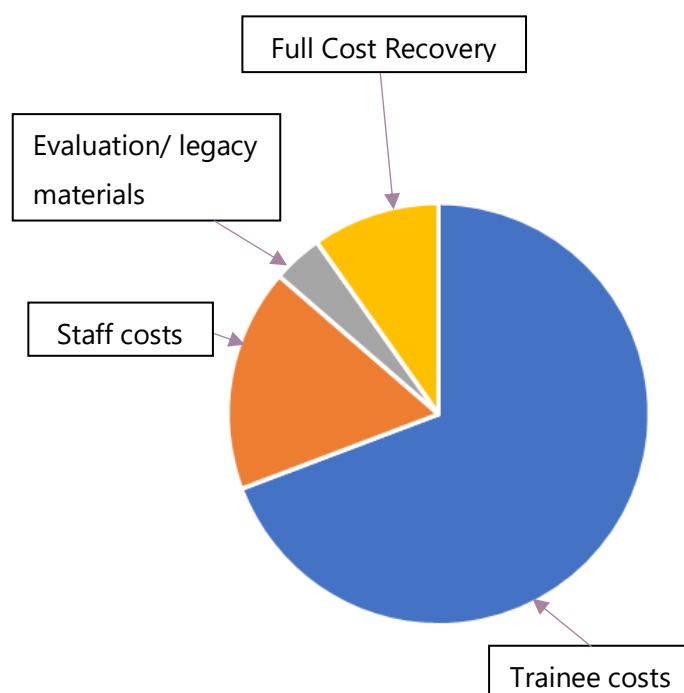
The project was 90% funded by NLHF (£501,111) and 10% funded by the SWWT through a contribution of Full Cost Recovery.

The original budget was largely adhered to but predicted areas of underspend in equipment and materials, travel for staff and travel for trainees based on cohorts 1 and 2 led to an agreed allocation of £10,000 to advocacy work, an increase to staff time in the final year to support a new co-ordinator and increased support with evaluation and further advocacy.

Although the Covid-19 pandemic increased costs for cohort 3’s residential trips (needing individual rooms), costs for activities remained mostly on target, with permitted use of the contingency/underspend in other areas. An underspend in trainee bursary payments due to trainees leaving early in cohorts 1 and 2 after securing employment, meant that the trainees in cohort 3 could all be offered an extra month, enabling 10-month placements. 4 trainees not in employment at the end of their placements in cohort 3 were also offered a further extra month through similar underspend.

The final budget was allocated as follows

Recruitment	£3,609
New Staff Costs	£85,648
Training for Staff	£4,213
Publicity and Promotion	£2,050
Travel for Staff	£3,407
Trainee Bursary Payments	£269,492
Travel and Expenses for Trainees	£10,268
Equipment and materials	£22,368
Other costs - training	£62,361
Other costs – facilities eg accommodation, food	£17,386
Evaluation (external support)	£7,356
Legacy material – film/toolkit	£14,020
Full cost recovery	£54,600
	£556,778



Cost per trainee

Each trainee received a monthly bursary of £1,000 and was allocated £1,600 for individual training at a local level (e.g. chainsaw, brushcutting), £1,000 for PPE and other small items of equipment and £80/month towards travel and expenses – this was managed by individual Trusts.

In addition, further training was organised centrally through access to e-learning modules, practical and theory sessions to achieve AQA units and residential weeks.

The cost per trainee (based on 30 trainees) of providing bursary and training averaged at £12,849, with variance depending on the length of traineeship (some trainees finding employment before the end of the full traineeship offer).

Added to this are staff time, staff training and travel, overheads (Full Cost Recovery), recruitment, publicity and promotion, totalling £149,918, increasing the average cost per trainee to £17,847.

Further costs for this scheme included evaluation and legacy materials and all Trusts met their own costs for staff mentoring and management above that claimed as a portion of Full Cost Recovery.

One recommendation made during evaluation was that a budget should be allocated for individual Trust management time. Making an allowance for more senior leadership Full Cost Recovery time would also allow for more strategic leadership and partnership working to enhance the benefits gained from the programme.

'The time and energy required to manage a project like this is substantial anyway, coupled with the aims and foundations of what Wild Path in particular is focusing on with its participants. It seems extraordinary that budget hasn't been allocated to the holding of the participants through what for some of them is a particularly challenging process. Support for the management team in supporting them as well as the programme itself.'

(County Lead)

Activity Review

Recruitment

Usual recruitment methods were reviewed and adjusted to ensure that they reached a wider pool of potential candidates than usual; supporting the Wild Path's aim to diversify the practical nature conservation sector by bringing in new talent

The training placements were promoted for up to 2 months by project staff directly contacting over 100 partner organisations and key individuals across the South West who work with people from a diverse range of backgrounds, for example Dorset Race Equality Council, Avon's Bristol Youth Links, Devon Community Directory, Wiltshire's Building Bridges Project and Somerset's Rural Youth Project. These were provided with posters, fliers and links to the Wild Paths website. The placements were not advertised on industry standard sites because in previous schemes these had attracted large numbers of graduates who did not necessarily fit the priority audiences for this particular scheme. Instead, the traineeships were advertised through the government "FindAJob" website, and sites such as 'Indeed'. Extensive use was also made of social media, especially Twitter, and local agricultural colleges and sixth forms were directly approached. Disability user-led charity Living Options Devon and their NLHF project Heritage Ability were particularly supportive of promoting the scheme.

Language used in promoting the programme was actively inclusive. All applicants for Cohorts 1 and 2 with a disability (40) who met the minimum criteria for the post were guaranteed an interview. However, numbers invited to selection days for Cohort 3 had to be limited due to the risk of infection with Covid-19 and in order to help avoid bias to those with disabilities a revision was made to the selection protocol so that though extra weight was given in scoring to those with a disability, an interview was not guaranteed.

Candidates were invited to apply via a centralised simple form, or via another medium of their choice eg video. Applicants were asked to focus on why they were applying, why they considered themselves suitable for the placement and why they were finding it difficult to secure a job in the sector. They also had to complete an information form which included diversity monitoring questions and questions which gave an idea of socio-economic background and level of education.

For cohort 1, candidates were able to apply for all 10 placements with first, second and third choices. To ease the sifting process in cohort 2, candidates could only select their top 3 choices. For cohort 3, with places restricted on the selection days due to Covid-19, this was further reduced to only being able to indicate first and second choices. A change was also made to require candidates for cohorts 2 and 3 to hold a driving licence by their selection day. With driving to remote rural locations being a requirement for trainees, this avoided any uncertainty on the ability of individuals to undertake the traineeship before an offer was made, which had been experienced with cohort 1, when over 40 candidates applied without licences.

Overall, recruitment went well, with 605 eligible applications over the three years. Full data is given in Appendix 2. This contrasts sharply with the low numbers of applicants currently being experienced for many paid positions in the sector and shows the need for, and desirability of, funded trainee positions.

Selection

The applications received were collated by the Project Co-ordinator and anonymised. Project Leads then met to sift the applications against scoring criteria and chose candidates for their own county selection days. Feedback was given to those who didn't progress to the next stage with some generic pointers as to how to improve applications and details of other schemes that they may be interested in.

Over the 3 cohorts, 206 candidates were invited to at least 1 selection day, with 1 selection day being held by each Trust. These followed the format developed over previous Skills for the Future schemes, with candidates spending time informally working together on a variety of practical activities and given a short more formal interview. Adjustments were made for those with disabilities as required. All candidates were offered individual feedback and some who were unsuccessful were offered opportunities elsewhere.

Throughout the process the Project Co-ordinator reminded leads/staff/mentors about the aims of the project and to keep assessing against need, enthusiasm and aptitude rather than choosing those with more existing skills.

In total, 31 candidates were selected, 10 for each cohort with 1 further candidate replacing a trainee in cohort 1 who decided after one month that they would prefer to take a different career path. Overall, 24 out of 31 individuals (77.4%) recruited were from backgrounds traditionally underrepresented in the natural heritage workforce (i.e. with a disability or long term health condition, from ethnic minority groups including People of Colour, not educated to degree level or from backgrounds of less opportunity).

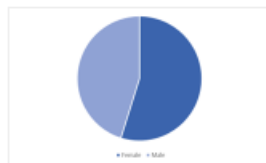
Full data on those who attended the selection days and the final trainees selected is given in Appendix 2, with a representation below:

Diversity within Wild Paths trainees

31 Trainees

Gender

- 14 Male
- 17 Female



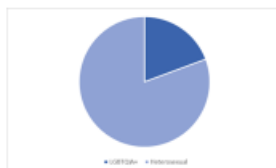
Disability

- 4 trainees with disabilities



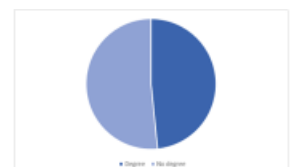
Sexual orientation

- 6 trainees identify as LGBTQIA+



Education

- 15 trainees without a higher education qualification



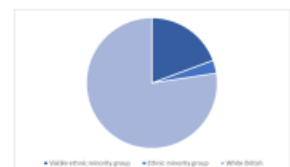
Age

- 11 trainees aged 18-25
- 20 trainees aged 26-59



Ethnicity

- 6 trainees of a visible ethnic minority group
- 1 trainee of an ethnic minority group



Socio-economic background

- 10 trainees who have had less access to opportunities/resources



Training plan overview

Mentors and leads

All Leads undertook the 2-day Mental Health First Aid qualification to help support trainees experiencing long term mental ill health, or staff or trainees experiencing stress or mental ill health. In 2019, Leads and mentors also undertook personal effectiveness and time management training sessions developed by DoWT.

In 2022 all staff had opportunity to undertake Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI training) with The Wildlife Trusts (TWT) including An introduction to EDI, EDI: Appropriate Terminology, An Introduction to Anti-Racism, Managing With Neurodiversity In Mind and Managing With Mental Health In Mind, with further topics and opportunities available (see Appendix 7).

Each year residentials were held prior to trainees starting for those designated as mentors. In the first year, mentors received training in mental health awareness and having difficult conversations, and a session was held on exploring the mentor/trainee relationship. This time together also enabled sharing of experiences, hopes and concerns about the programme in an informal setting and time to issue folders ready for the trainees and go over the expectations of the training programme and reporting structure (see Appendix 8). Mentors joining later in the programme received some individual training according to need and in year 3 all were offered training in coaching skills.

Originally it was anticipated that most mentors would remain in place over the course of the programme, but in reality many mentors changed either due to staff changing roles or team restructures. This presented a challenge in offering consistency to trainees and the level of training individual mentors had received in preparing them for the role. Feedback has also indicated that mentors did not always feel sufficiently trained to manage trainees with more complex needs and that specific individual training for mentors would have been beneficial.

The role of the mentor was recognised as key to the success of the programme and trainees gave very positive feedback about their mentors, with mentors also valuing the experience.

'The most amazing mentor who teaches so well and has completely changed my confidence and self-belief with his manner and method of mentoring. Gently pushes you to direct and pace your own learning and gets you to figure it out yourself with only necessary direction. The best way (I think) of teaching because it also teaches self-driven learning and problem solving not following direct instruction.'

(Trainee)

'Helping the first trainee get over the barriers she was experiencing. Talking them through and increasing her confidence to enable her to get the job she wanted was amazing.'

(Mentor)



(Feedback from trainees asked to describe their mentors)

Trainees

Overview

Initially it was intended to offer 30 9-month practical placements offering a combination of work-based learning, central and individually tailored training. Trainees were expected to undertake training for 32 hours per week, based on Monday-Thursday.

For cohort 1, within one month of starting a placement, one trainee opted to leave to pursue a less practical career path as a wildlife artist, so another candidate from the initial selection process was then offered an 8-month placement. Another trainee left after 8 months due to persistent absenteeism, although they remained supported by and in touch with their mentor. Thus 9 trainees successfully completed their placements.

Cohort 2 started well, with all ten trainees showing fantastic commitment to their placements and training. However, this cohort was disrupted by the start of the Covid-19 pandemic and, in March 2020, in person work and training had to cease. Trainees were given the option to either continue training within a new 'Training at Home' framework or defer their last two months of training. Five trainees opted to train at home and three elected to defer their training, whilst two secured employment from April 2020. All trainees had completed their training by September 2020.

Due to the pandemic, cohort 3 was delayed for a year, to start in September 2021. Underspends in some cost headings enabled ten 10-month placements to be offered for this cohort. With further underspends in some areas (e.g. with trainees securing employment early), placements were extended by an extra month for the 4 trainees still seeking employment at the end of their original placements. All ten trainees successfully completed their placements by the end of July 2022.

As with previous schemes, trainees were encouraged to apply for jobs as soon as they felt ready and were supported in finding out about and making applications.

All of the 29 trainees who completed their traineeships (100%) were considered job ready before or by the end of the placements. Of cohort 1, all 9 had gained employment within 6 months of completion. Of Cohort 2, 7 were in employment within 6 months of completion and all of cohort 3 are already in employment within 3 months. Types of employment are shown in Appendix 9. Overall, 90% of trainees from the programme had secured employment within 6 months of completion. 11 trainees (38%) secured their first roles within SWWT, with 2 returning after employment elsewhere, meaning 45% have been employed within SWWT at some point since completing their training.

Local work-based training

Trainees were each placed with one Trust to learn from and alongside conservation practitioners, one of whom acted as their mentor. Whilst central training was standardised, this allowed for some local flexibility and flavour to suit the trainees and their teams.

‘Being part of an amazing team (not only our reserve team but the broader team of the traineeship) was an extremely special experience.’

‘Working with my team. It was a surprise to be able to work with such a great bunch of people who were all so open to teaching and supporting me’

(Trainees)

All trainees began their placements with their individual Trusts in the September and within the first month were involved in induction processes including signing training agreements, local workplace and Health & Safety familiarisation, and work shadowing activities. All also completed driving checklists to assess current competency of driving and level of familiarisation/training required and purchased necessary uniform and PPE.

Each trainee was issued with a folder by their mentor containing key information about the programme and a series of templates for meetings and reporting to assist in keeping training on track with their learning, assist the evaluation process and help maintain the trainee/mentor relationship (see Appendix 8).

Over the September to March period, trainees were generally focussed on gaining experience of winter practical conservation work such as scrub/grassland/heathland/reedbed management, hedgelaying, woodland management including tree felling and coppicing, and working with/supervising volunteer groups. From April onwards work focussed more on biological surveying, site management monitoring, fence boundary checks and repairs, site access and safety and public engagement activities such as leading guided walks.

Actual work varied Trust to Trust and placement to placement depending on the sites where trainees were based. Some trainees, for example gaining experience of dry-stone walling, stock handling or growing wildflowers. Over time, and particularly from January onwards, trainees consolidated all their learning through practical application on a more daily basis to gain a feel of transitioning from trainee level to assistant warden (ie ‘job ready’). Some of the trainees’ most positive experiences

were gained through work-based training, examples of their feedback on positives of the programme included:

'I enjoyed working with the livestock whilst assisting with TB testing and livestock check.'

'Spring/Summer surveying especially newt work, dormouse boxes, bird surveying.'

'...practical skills such as drystone walling and hedge laying, finding a slow worm.'

'I have enjoyed being practical and have realised I am far more capable than I thought I was.'

'I greatly valued the support of the other reserves staff who passed on their knowledge and experience to help me be a confident chainsaw operator.'

Tailored training

Most trainees did not already hold brushcutter or chainsaw (CS30 and 31) industry qualifications so external training was arranged early in the traineeship by individual trusts to enable trainees to gain as much experience as possible of tree felling, scrub removal etc during the winter work season, before birds were nesting and this work ceased for the spring and summer. These two 'tickets' are considered a vital basic need for those wishing to pursue a career in practical conservation. All trainees achieved their brushcutter and chainsaw maintenance and crosscutting (CS30) qualifications. All trainees also progressed their chainsaw training to the next level, qualifying in felling small trees (CS31) with the exception two trainees who decided not to pursue this option as they were favouring a career path such as wildlife survey. When asked about their most positive experiences, trainees often referred to gaining these practical skills:

'Chainsaw training and delivering the winter work programme which has inspired me to think of specialising in tree work.'

'Learning to use chainsaws and carrying out woodland thinning.'

'Getting chainsaw ticket.'

Other training was arranged locally based on need and any additional skillsets trainees wished to acquire during their placements as well as opportunities arising in individual trusts. This included, for example, 4 x 4 driving, trailer driving, ATV, survey, GIS and livestock handling.

Centralised training

Centralised training was delivered by e-learning modules, AQAs and group training delivered by Wildlife Trust staff and external experts during residentials.

All trainees were able to undertake 12 health and safety and personal development e-learning modules and receive training certificates for each module (see Appendix

10). These were provided by The Access Group and took 30-45 minutes each to complete, with progress monitored by the Project Co-ordinator.

'We completed lots of e-learning modules to start with covering a wide range of topics which I thought was very thorough.'

(Trainee)

All trainees also undertook AQAs through the AQA Unit Award scheme. Cohort 1 were offered 14 core units and 6 optional units (some based on their individual placements) and between them gained 78 AQA Unit Award accreditations. Following feedback from trainees, some core units were re-written, combined/consolidated or removed so that for cohorts 2 and 3, only 10 of these were offered alongside the 6 optional units (see Appendix 10).

Cohort 2's training towards AQAs was disrupted by Covid-19 but trainees continued to work on these from home and together achieved 86 AQA accreditations.

As Cohort 3 had their first residential training reduced due to Covid-19, more opportunity for all trainees to get together for 1-day training was provided and all were offered the optional units together. Cohort 3 gained 152 AQA accreditations.

Over the 3 cohorts, a total of 316 AQA Unit Award accreditations were achieved. As feedback from all cohorts showed trainees really valued spending time learning together and asked for more joint training, an ideal training format for future programmes could be to include more 1-day training sessions around AQA qualifications as were held for Cohort 3.

'I got to do the majority of the AQA units/training that was specified in the original advert and at the start of the traineeship.'

(Trainee)

Originally, it was planned that trainees would attend two residential training weeks at Wildlife Trust centres, one in month 2 and the other in month 7, to cover key skills such as First Aid, Health & Safety, transferable skills such as interview techniques and time management and some training for the AQA Units.

Cohort 1 was able to undertake their two residential 5-day training camps and two 1-day workshops as planned. The first residential was generally well received by trainees:

'I loved meeting everyone and having opportunities to talk about our experiences.'

'Enjoyed going somewhere new and being taught by different people each day.'

However, some trainees found the amount of classroom sessions quite intense, and an adjustment was made to the original programme to reduce classroom time and increase practical elements for future residentials.

'Perhaps more, shorter, varied sessions interspersed with outside sessions rather than a couple of the quite long classroom sessions.'
(Trainee feedback to first residential)

'Better structure – less intense “classroom” days and more time made it feel relaxed.'
(Trainee feedback to second residential)

Cohort 2 were able to attend one 5-day long residential but the second had to be cancelled due to restrictions imposed due to the Covid-19 pandemic with trainees either opting to undertake training at home or defer their traineeship (see above). To cover some of the training that would have taken place on the residential, workshops were arranged by Zoom and independent learning. Trainees were also offered an additional £100 budget for registration fees for online distance learning to complement existing practical skills e.g. arboriculture or ecopsychology.

The first residential for Cohort 3 was held in month 1 and reduced to 3 days to minimise the costs and risk associated with Covid-19, in case of forced cancellation and to reduce the time trainees were together. A second 2-day residential was held in month 3 and a final 5-day residential held in month 8. Some of Cohort 3 expressed residential as one of the favourite aspects of their traineeships:

'First residential meeting all trainees getting to know, feeling welcome, inclusive, fitting in and comfortable, making friends, feeling like finding the right place.'

'Seeing newts up close during Kingcombe residential.'

'Beaver experience – so informative. Mind blowing what these giant rodents can do.'

(Trainees Cohort 3, favourite experience)

Experience from all three cohorts is that residential training should include a good mixture of classroom sessions (theoretical and practical), field learning sessions such as newt surveying, opportunities for reflection and feedback, and social time such as walks and downtime/camp fire.

An example training programme and training at home programme is shown in Appendix 11.

Advocacy

The Project Co-ordinator attended the national Skills for the Future meeting hosted by NLHF in London in December 2018 and presented to other projects about the Wild Paths recruitment experience. This meeting provided some excellent networking opportunities and led to the Project Co-ordinator being involved at national level in EDI discussions and liaising with the TWT EDI lead, to whom Wild Paths materials were provided.

Though advocacy around the need to actively diversify the nature conservation workforce was originally part of Wild Paths, mentoring from Heritage Insider led to recognition that more focus should be given to this aspect. With underspends predicted, it was agreed with NLHF in January 2020 to reallocate £10,000 to try to

make as much impact as possible within the sector to acknowledge, embed and celebrate the benefits of workforce diversity at an institutional level. Initially this was to include staff training and production of resources, with recognition that individual Trusts were at different stages and had different needs.

With the project put on hold due to the Covid-19 pandemic, changes had started to happen within individual Trusts and the sector by the time Wild Paths re-started in April 2021. A groundswell of work had developed around improving EDI practice in nature conservation organisations. Three new staff were appointed nationally to support TWT, including an officer specifically responsible for EDI learning, so that in spring 2022 a programme of free training started to be offered to all staff/trainees in TWT, and a Framework for Inclusion was produced nationally and offered to local Trusts to adapt for their own purposes. An EDI community of practice was also created, along with opportunities for Trust staff to become allies or join groups on specific topics and EDI included at a meeting of Chief Executives.

This mostly met the original aims for use of the £10,000 NLHF funding for advocacy work and so it was agreed that the funding could instead be used to produce a toolkit for inclusive traineeships as a downloadable resource for any organisation wishing to use the Wild Paths model for inclusive traineeships. It was also agreed to fund a film on 'a career in nature conservation' showing different routes into the sector for people from different backgrounds and with different life experiences, aiming to inspire people into the sector and show the opportunities available. This involved both trainees and staff.

Who benefitted?

Benefits of Wild Paths were felt at different levels, including trainee, staff, organisational, and the nature conservation sector.

Trainees

Overall, trainees received the most benefit from the programme. Individuals, many of whom may have found it difficult to get into the sector due to experiencing various personal barriers, gained key sector qualifications, local work-based experience and training across a wide spectrum of applicable skills. They benefitted especially from *'gaining knowledge and experience from people who work in the sector'* (Trainee).

They also acquired an understanding of what a role in nature conservation can offer, advice on seeking jobs to match their personal interests and skills, and support in producing CVs, in applying for jobs and attending interviews. This has significantly increased their employability within the sector and individual career prospects and given *'hope for the future'* (Trainee).

All trainees who completed their traineeships were considered 'job ready' and 90% had reached their ultimate goal of gaining employment within the natural heritage sector within 6 months of finishing their placements. Others have achieved their goal a little later. This was especially rewarding for trainees and programme staff alike.

'I think you are diversifying the workforce, personally coming from a low-income background, inner city urban upbringing and being of mixed heritage – this was made accessible to me. I think I would have really struggled to get into the conservation sector without this opportunity. (I had 2 + years of applying with no luck prior to this opportunity. Plus, I'm not posh).'

'Realising during my interview questions that I have a lot of skills and knowledge which I didn't have a year ago and that I am now capable and confident to progress my career.'

'Lacked awareness of career potential and thought had left it too late to get into the sector, unaware of first steps to take and had a lack of confidence. Now have gained skills and qualifications, met and learnt from knowledgeable people, had an interview, gained confidence, and opened the door into the industry.'

'Could not afford to pay for college or training, worried about judgement about mental health, worried about gaps in employment history, volunteering hadn't provided enough training, and worried about physical capabilities. Now has tickets and skills for CV.'

As well as gaining natural heritage skills, trainees benefitted through personal development. Training included personal effectiveness, assertiveness, reframing, conflict resolution, body language, and ways to maintain authority and appear confident. Many gained confidence, which was regularly cited as a barrier to achievement at the start of the traineeships/in applications. This has enabled them to

go on to become effective and valuable employees. Feedback indicates much of this has also been down to the way in which the trainees have been mentored, supported by programme staff and felt accepted for who they are, enabling people to overcome personal difficulties to succeed. The Project Co-ordinator and mentors played a key role in this throughout and trainees benefitted from having not just these contacts, but project leads and other Trust/HR staff to turn to if needed.

‘Treating me like a human being and not patronising me when I felt awful. Understanding my difficulties and giving me support to push through them and continually trying, even when I was difficult to deal with. Thank you.’

‘Worried about opinions on past life, not knowing how to explain gap in previous employment, cost of re-training, fear of being a hindrance to their mentor. Now has lots of relevant training for CV, access to key training blocked by cost previously. Confidence has been boosted and feels valued.’

‘I have gained so much experience and confidence with organising and running work parties for volunteers which is probably one of the biggest achievements as prior to the traineeship the thought of being able to do this was quite daunting.’

‘Received support from mentor and wider reserves team and has more confidence from this and from the support of others through sharing knowledge and experience.’

‘Project co-ordinator has been outstanding and supported with care throughout.’

‘My mentor could not have been more supportive or encouraging with giving their time, sharing their knowledge, and all with an ability to put you at ease and not make you feel like you were ever asking a silly question.’

Trainees have also benefitted from training together as a cohort. The chance to meet new people and share positive, reinforcing experiences was important in building self-esteem, and enabling friendships and support networks to develop that will go forward into the future. Private Facebook and WhatsApp groups have facilitated this. Trainees commenting on their most positive moments included:

‘It was great to have a network of people all at the same point in their careers to learn from and be supported by.’

‘Making new connections and networking.’

‘Being valued as part of a team, brilliant learning opportunities, meeting and working alongside the other trainees.’

The following case studies for trainees across the three cohorts give a flavour of the experiences and benefits felt by trainees (see following pages).



“I started off volunteering with Somerset Wildlife Trust as much as I could, however, working part time so I could study and volunteer meant that I had no spare change to get the industry ‘tickets’ needed to find a job in conservation. The traineeship came along at the perfect time. It meant that I could get invaluable on the job experience and some industry qualifications as well.”

“My mentor was brilliant at teaching me the ins and outs of conservation and passing on knowledge you can only get by being in the industry. The traineeship taught me so much more than just practical skills. It built my self-confidence and made me believe that forging a career in conservation is possible. I went home every day feeling like I had made a positive difference to our wildlife.”

“Being a quiet, introverted person, the traineeship really helped me to come out of my shell. Leading volunteer groups was something I wasn’t particularly looking forward to. I actually thoroughly enjoyed talking with the volunteers and it helped me to be more confident talking to large groups of people.”

Steve had previously had a career in hospitality where he managed pubs and events. Knowing that this wasn’t his passion nor what he wanted to for the rest of his life he sought to change that. He always had a love for nature and the outdoors. After spending some time travelling, Steve cemented that passion and decided that he’d like to work outside. He started the journey into conservation by doing a DipHE Environment Science with the Open University. It was during some residentials that he did some conservation/surveying work and decided that he wanted to work with wildlife and conservation charities.

Steve hit the ground running when he started the traineeship and couldn’t get enough of being out on reserves doing practical work. The physicality of the work was tough to begin with, but soon got easier as he’s physical ability increased. The Traineeship was a genuine life changer for Steve, and he feels he would not have the quality of life he does now without it.

Formal Achievements

Lantra	Brushcutters, 4X4 Off Road Driving
NPTC	CS30/31 Chainsaw Crosscutting, Maintenance and Felling
Highfield	Level 3 Emergency First Aid
AQA	Hedgelaying, Post and Rail Fencing, Stockproof Fencing, Volunteer Management, Leading a Group, Communicating Through the Media, Lookering and Conservation Grazing, Dry Stone Walling, Coppicing, Winter Tree ID.

Where are they now? After the traineeship Steve started working for a nature reserves contracting business. working for various conservation charities such as Somerset Wildlife Trust, Butterfly Conservation Trust, National Trust and Natural England, carrying out a lot of practical conservation work on their reserves and developing strong working relationships with these organisations. Steve was, though, keen to work for a South West Wildlife Trust and in September 2021, started working as an Assistant Warden for Devon Wildlife Trust.



“Wild Paths gave me the opportunity I needed to prove to myself I am worthy to work in the conservation sector and that I can excel in the field when given the chance.”

“I took to the practical tasks naturally and found an affinity with working out on the land. I also found myself drawn to the wellbeing work that Avon Wildlife Trust was doing and that has brought me to where I am at now.”

“I feel like Wild Paths has helped me to follow my intuition and dreams of living in a way that aligns with my values. It’s also given me the skills and confidence I needed to begin my journey into the world of conservation work.”

Before Wild Paths, Ainsley was into conservation but couldn’t seem to get a job in the field of UK conservation. He graduated from university studying Zoology in 2015 and did various volunteer conservation work abroad but found that was financially unsustainable. After years of applications and getting nothing, Ainsley sort of gave up on trying to find work in conservation and worked in bars, restaurants, warehouses and offices. The year leading up to Wild Paths he had 5 different jobs but each job he found didn’t fulfil him so he continued to move on. Directly before getting the Wild Paths placement Ainsley was working in finance (but says he has no idea how he had no background in this!) and was so pleased to be able to quit that job and move on to doing something that aligned with his values.

FORMAL ACHIEVEMENTS

Lantra: Brushcutter

NPTC: Chainsaw certificates CS30 Chainsaw maintenance and cross-cutting and CS31 Felling small trees up to 380mm.

Highfield: Emergency First Aid at Work

AQA: Coppicing Woodland Shrubs & Trees, Introduction to Conservation Grazing, Introduction to Livestock Checking, Lookering, Introduction to Woodland Management for Nature Conservation, Volunteer Management: Working with Volunteers, Emotional and Mental Well-being, Hedgelaying, Leading a Group, Leading a Guided Walk, Working with Children and Young People in Conservation, Constructing a Post and Rail Fence, Constructing a Stock Proof Fence

Where are they now? The traineeship was cut short because of lockdown and Ainsley struggled a little during lockdown to find the right path going forward. After lots of thought he found himself drawn to study Ecopsychology with Natural Academy. Having finishing this course he began running workshops on natural mindfulness and nature connection with an aim of empowering people and improving their wellbeing. Ainsley lived in a small community on the land of Embercombe in Devon, assisting with the maintenance of the site and the land here and also volunteered with Somerset Wildlife Trust, delivering their wellbeing program based on the 5 pathways to nature connection. Since then, Ainsley has been employed by the Avon Wildlife Trust as Reserves Manager with duties covering ‘My Wild City’ and management of Bennett’s Patch & Whites Paddock, Brandon Hill.



“Our traineeship programme was so full and varied; that is the wonderful diversity of the conservation industry.”

“The practical skills that I developed throughout have been invaluable along with the confidence I now have in leading volunteer groups and engaging with the public; something that I thought I would most likely struggle to feel comfortable doing...not so! I have loved my time doing great work for our wildlife. The benefits that our work does for nature is rewarded ten-fold by what nature gives us back.”

“You really can be a trainee at any age (being in my 50’s, a grandparent - I should know!) And you never stop learning. So, I would urge anyone thinking they would like to do something similar to just go for it, you have nothing to lose and an awful lot to gain.”

Caroline had a previous career in administration, legal, finance and HR but, being fortunate to have grown up on her parents’ small farm and having experienced an idyllic childhood, knew ultimately that this wasn’t what she wanted her whole life to consist of. After some significant life events, Caroline decided it was time to follow her heart.

Caroline first applied for the traineeship in 2018 but was unsuccessful so she volunteered for Devon Wildlife Trust, which she found helped her get to know the type of work involved and cemented her desire for a career in nature and the outdoors even more. She advises others not to give up if you are not successful in securing a placement first time round. Caroline continued to work evenings to supplement the bursary and found the traineeship very flexible. Caroline has found her stress levels greatly reduced from spending more time out of the office and in our beautiful countryside, and says the traineeship has already brought many benefits into her life.

FORMAL ACHIEVEMENTS

Lantra:	Brushcutter (undertaken during Caroline’s initial volunteering).
NPTC:	Chainsaw certificates CS30 Chainsaw maintenance and cross-cutting and CS31 Felling small trees up to 380mm.
Highfield:	Emergency First Aid at Work.
AQA Award:	Volunteer Management, Leading a Work Group, Coppicing, Hedgelaying, Constructing a Stock Proof fence/Post and Rail Fence, Community Engagement & Inclusion, Woodland Management, Conservation Grazing, Livestock Checking (Looking), Leading a Guided Walk, Creating Wildlife Ponds, Wildlife Gardening, Working with Children and Young People in Conservation, Dry Stone Walling, Emotional and Mental Well-Being, Communication Through the Media.

Where are they now? Seven months into her training, Caroline was successful in obtaining a position within Devon Wildlife Trust as part of the Working Wetlands team as an Advisory Officer in the Tamar catchment. Caroline’s role aims to improve the quality and extent of semi-natural habitats and ecosystem services, such as water and soils, making best use of nature-based solutions. Caroline visits farmers and landowners to see what advice and help can be offered and says, *“My learning is definitely still in full swing, and I will be looking to undertake further formal qualifications to progress in the role alongside my own continual learning. I still pinch myself, it’s wonderful!”*



“I wasn’t sure it would be possible at my age to start a whole new career in conservation, but when I saw the Wild Paths scheme, I knew I had to go for it. It was the perfect opportunity to gain invaluable experience and qualifications to boost my CV. “

“It was fantastic to have a training budget which enabled me to get the key industry ‘tickets’ I needed for future employment, but just as important was working alongside experienced reserves staff – they really helped build my confidence with the practical elements of the role. By the end of the traineeship, I felt competent and capable of taking on a reserves assistant role. I absolutely loved working on the reserves and every day I came home exhausted but happy.”

“The traineeship is a great thing to do if you are starting a career in conservation. You will get all the skills that you need for the industry, support from some wonderful people and it’s an opportunity to work for the one of the best conservation organisations in the country.”

Claire decided on a complete career change after she was made redundant from a long-held career in NHS analytics. Having always loved nature and being outdoors, she resolved not to return to an office-based job. She took the first steps towards a career in conservation by volunteering for a local community trust and taking some short online courses such as plant ID and badger surveying. At the start of the traineeship, Claire had to adjust quickly to the new working environment and physical demands of the job but soon felt like a valuable member of the team. One of her main positive experiences was learning to use a chainsaw and getting plenty of practice with woodland thinning and tree safety works. She also thoroughly enjoyed working with the livestock at Chancellors Farm whilst assisting with TB testing and livestock check. This was a unique experience that helped develop a practical understanding of working with cattle.

FORMAL ACHIEVEMENTS

- Lantra: Brushcutter
- NPTC: Chainsaw certificates CS30 Chainsaw maintenance and cross-cutting and CS31 Felling small trees up to 380mm.
- Highfield: Emergency First Aid at Work.
- AQA Award: Volunteer Management, Leading a Work Group, Coppicing, Hedgelaying, Constructing a Stock Proof fence/Post and Rail Fence, Community Engagement & Inclusion, Woodland Management, Conservation Grazing, Livestock Checking (Looking), Leading a Guided Walk, Creating Wildlife Ponds, Wildlife Gardening, Working with Children and Young People in Conservation, Dry Stone Walling, Emotional and Mental Well-Being, Communication Through the Media.

Claire is now working for Yeovil Rivers Community Trust as a project officer carrying out restoration works and enhancements to local rivers and ponds. She is enjoying working in partnership with other charities and local landholders and on community engagement projects helping to deliver nature-based volunteering activities. She is planning to keep her land management and chainsaw skills current by volunteering with Somerset Wildlife Trust.

Staff

Staff have also found real benefits from being part of Wild Paths.

Many found the experience of managing the programme and mentoring trainees especially rewarding, giving great job satisfaction and recognition of their role in nurturing new talent:

'I feel very lucky to have been involved in the traineeship since it started and personally I don't think there can be a greater reward in life than sharing in a person's development and seeing them gain new skills, overcome barriers, whatever they may be, to achieve their goals. It's been an absolute pleasure to support their journey and I can't thank the Wild Paths project enough for enabling me to play a small part.'

'Seeing the trainees grow and blossom, especially their confidence, is satisfying to witness.'

'I am very proud that at an urban site we can host trainees.'

'It was the best job I've ever had in my entire career, the best thing I've ever done, the thing I'm most proud of.'

'I feel like it's been an absolute privilege to be part of this scheme.'

For some staff, mentoring a trainee was their first experience of line managing, giving a new opportunity to gain skills in leadership. Other staff reported they themselves had gained confidence and enjoyed the experience of training, some at first lacking confidence in their ability to lead a training session but then realising how much knowledge they had to impart.

'Excellent to see how staff can try out line management.'

'I did the traineeship and then was managing them in my new role as an employee which was an amazing journey.'

Providing training for project leads and mentors increased the skills and confidence of staff to manage and support a more diverse workforce, for example through Mental Health Awareness or Mental Health First Aid training, coaching skills, personal effectiveness and, latterly, EDI training through TWT.

'One candidate required a British Sign Language interpreter and no staff member had worked with one before, which resulted in a positive learning experience for all involved.'

'I think the mental health awareness training is incredibly important and I found it very interesting. Having some experience of different mental health issues, I found it relevant to think of them in a wider context. I think this should be part of training for the wider trust, especially for managers.'

'Increased confidence in supporting people with mental health issues and signposting them. Improved knowledge in how to plan for difficult conversations.'

Staff have also been refreshed, up-dating their own knowledge and skills:

'Passing skills on has been beneficial for those supervising or mentoring e.g. brushing-up on their own skills and being mindful about how things should be done.'

Staff have also recognised the value of having a trainee in delivering their work programmes. Although considered by some as 'time-neutral', staff have benefitted from an extra pair of hands:

'Wild Paths made a difference to me personally. I couldn't deliver my work programme without a trainee.'

Organisational benefits

Wildlife Trusts have found having trainees has often brought new perspectives, infectious enthusiasm and challenges to thinking:

'Trainees have brought an injection of energy, youth, ideas etc. now part of how we are, what was it like before traineeships? Can't remember!'
(Staff stakeholder)

All Trusts have valued trainees as high-quality candidates for vacancies in their organisations during a period when recruitment has been challenging. Thirteen Wild Paths trainees have been employed by SWWT over the course of the programme and this has increased diversity within the teams:

'We have had the obvious benefits of having been able to employ some of our ex-trainees, knowing that they are high calibre individuals.'

'...nature reserves team, more accepted to have gender diversity,'
(Staff stakeholders)

Other trainees have taken up positions with partner organisations, strengthening Trust reputations and relations:

'Our reputation has been enhanced as trainees head out into the sector and talk about the success of the programme.'

'One participant has progressed rapidly within the sector and now advises us on number of matters. They also sit on our Board of Trustees and are well respected for their knowledge and commitment.'

'Other local organisations saying how refreshing to have high quality candidates from the programme – this opens doors for us and for the trainees.'
(Staff stakeholders)

And external contacts made during the traineeships have at times helped expand the reputation of SWWT in the community, for example a mentor commented:

'As part of the stock grazing AQA the trainees go in and help the farmers, for example, at TB testing time which is an extremely stressful time for everyone. Both trainees have shone and kept professional the whole time. We received feedback from the farmer who was very impressed and spoke about how the trainees helped the whole day to run smoothly and be less stressful'

As mentioned above, organisational work programmes have benefitted through trainees increasing the capacity of work for some teams. Whilst there is time taken to mentor and train the trainees, it also means staff are not lone working so can carry out work that requires two people present whilst offering the training opportunities. Trainees have also helped with engagement activities, work experience programmes or school visits, enabling activities to go ahead that would otherwise not be possible without an extra pair of hands, whilst gaining valuable experience themselves.

'Across the Trust we see a difference that trainees make to our work – we would struggle to deliver our work to the same quality without them.'

'It quickly became clear that trainees are a huge boost to the organisation, from day one!'
(Mentors)

The Wild Paths training programme has also enabled Trusts to try out and refine training methods and helped develop whole Trust training initiatives, for example in Dorset, training developed for Wild Paths has been used as part of an emerging leaders training package, and contacts have been made with new training providers through Wild Paths:

'Delivering the training has helped to feed into training across the organisation.'
(Staff stakeholder)

Collaborating over Wild Paths brought the benefit of central, co-ordinated training and ability to apply for medium to long term funding. The programme has been beneficial in strengthening of relations between staff in different Wildlife Trusts, which can be helpful in learning from each other, avoiding reinventing the wheel and offering mutual support. It has also enabled the partnership to benefit from each other's skills and experience.

'Development of partnerships – we did have loose links, but these have been strengthened e.g. HR, mentors.'
(Staff stakeholder)

Wild Paths has also acted as a catalyst for change, especially around EDI and the need for this to be addressed at an organisational and sector level. It has demonstrated a way to recruit and train a more diverse workforce, developed skills and capacity to manage people with diverse needs, and highlighted the need for more work for Trusts to become fully inclusive. In Dorset the Co-ordinators advocating for more work on EDI has led to a new EDI Working Group.

'Wild Paths is part of the journey [...] to being a more inclusive organisation.'
(Staff stakeholder)

Natural heritage sector benefits

The natural heritage sector has benefitted through gaining new diversity and talent in 29 people who are skilled, experienced and ready for employment, filling skills gaps and reinforcing the workforce. Trainees have been in demand with over 90% being in employment within 6 months of finishing their placements and positive feedback has been received from employers. With the sector recognising its lack of diversity, it can be hoped that with their positive experiences, former trainees will advocate for inclusive workforce practices in future and continue to help diversify the sector.

'From the little time I've had in this industry, I think diversity does need improving.'
(Trainee)

Wild Paths programme staff have also advocated for a more diverse and inclusive workforce, playing a part in the movement for change within the sector and enabling the sector to benefit from their experience and learnings. This has included:

- Involvement in the 'Resourcing the Future' conference at Bournemouth University in February 2020, with an agenda based around Diversity, Inclusion and Collaboration. Wild Paths suggested Dr Anjana Khatwa as keynote speaker, who shared her experience of racism within the natural heritage sector in her career as an earth scientist (written account at <https://www.cnp.org.uk/blog/what's-it-be-brown-white-landscape>). This was extremely well received and informative for the nearly 100 delegates from mostly white conservation organisations in Dorset. The Wild Paths Project Co-ordinator also spoke about removing barriers to people entering the sector, such as socio-economic, disability and educational background and showcased Wild Paths as a proven mechanism to train people new to the sector.
- Input to the NLHF Toolkit Racial Equity in Nature – A guide to recruiting and nurturing diverse early career talent.
- Input to RAND Europe study for JPMorgan Chase Foundation regarding supporting vulnerable groups into green jobs.

The sector will also benefit from the experience gained through ten years of the Skills to the Future programme, with Wild Paths providing a Toolkit for others wishing to undertake entry-level programmes, a film on a career in nature conservation, and learning materials eg new AQA outcomes for use locally via WT work with volunteers and nationally via the AQA unit award scheme database. Thus, the programme has increased the capacity of the sector to deliver training and share good practice.

What worked well and why?

The refinement of the recruitment methodology over the ten years of the Skills for the Future programmes resulted in greatly increased numbers of applicants from diverse backgrounds to Wild Paths in comparison with previous schemes. Summary recruitment data shows 11 % of applicants had a disability, 50% did not have a degree, 11% identified as an of an ethnic minority (5% if excluding white ethnic minority), 10% identified as LGBTQIA+ and 45% acknowledged at least one low socio-economic indicator. Slightly more people identifying as female applied to the programme than those identifying as males, with one person identifying as transgender and one as non-binary. 57% of people applying were aged 25-59 with one person over 60 and the remainder 18-25.

The evaluation of Wildlife Skills and the Dorset Conservation Skills Programme revealed that, of 88 trainees, 20% had overcome significant personal barriers, including mental health, disability and socio-economic. In Wild Paths 77% of trainees were from backgrounds traditionally underrepresented in the natural heritage workforce (i.e. with a disability or long term health condition, from ethnic minority groups including People of Colour, not educated to degree level or from backgrounds of less opportunity). Thus, the target that 50% of participants were from excluded backgrounds was significantly exceeded, and showed recruitment methods were even more effective than anticipated, giving a good model for future programmes.

In particular, people with disabilities were better represented in the pool of applicants and those selected for the traineeships. All those with disabilities were invited to the selection days (except in Cohort 3 with Covid-19 putting restrictions on numbers), requiring adaptations for candidates with hearing impairments, with physical disabilities who were concerned about practical elements, and/or with dyslexia, ASC, or ADHD. Although staff were concerned about getting these adaptations right and making everyone comfortable, these adaptations were well received by candidates. Feedback generally was that the selection days felt relaxed with people able show their potential:

'The selection day was fun because it didn't feel like everyone had to fight to show they were the best. It felt really balanced and nice; I could just be myself'.

During the programme some further adjustments were made to make the selection process easier for the project staff. Rather than being able to apply for all placements as in Cohort 1, candidates were restricted to 3 placements in Cohort 2 and only 2 in Cohort 3, giving an order of preference. This gave more places for different candidates on selection days and less applications for each Trust to review. A change was also made for Cohorts 2 and 3 to require candidates to hold a driving licence before attending a selection day to rule out any uncertainty on the ability of a candidate to take up a placement offered. These adjustments worked well and are recommended for future schemes.

Overall, the training programme proved very successful. 29 participants completed their traineeships, with two dropping out – one as they decided on a more creative

Trainees were generally very happy with the level of support provided by the mentors, project leads and project co-ordinator. The way this worked varied a little between Trusts, but the mentor was the main point of contact at a local level, with the project lead supporting as needed. Meanwhile, the project co-ordinator was in close contact with all the trainees throughout, and the main contact for all the centralised training. Monthly trainee journaling, quarterly mentor/trainee reviews, trainee exit interviews and programme staff reflective sessions during the programme enabled continued reflection, adjustments and improvements to the programme. For example, at the end of Cohort 1 programme staff talked through specific examples of working with neurodiverse individuals, those with mental health conditions and some conflict between trainees and noted shared learning points. Changes were also made e.g. to the residentials based on trainee feedback. The structure of the project team and reflective processes therefore seems to be a good model for future schemes.

Trainees being part of organising their own work programme helped to build their network and lighten the administrative load for staff. Recruitment was also helped internally by the trainee programme linking to other areas of WT operations e.g. being able to promote traineeships to interested volunteers and when one trainee helped recruit the next.

The programme has successfully brought new talent from people with diverse backgrounds into the nature conservation workforce, with 90% of trainees securing employment within 6 months of completion (exceeding the target of 75%). *'Going through the job description of the job a trainee ideally wants on a regular basis'* helped with job seeking, as did support in making applications and with interview techniques.

Originally it was anticipated that 2-3 vacancies would arise within the SWWT. In fact, 13 trainees were recruited into vacancies that arose within the SWWT over the course of the programme, many into the Trust with which they had undertaken their placement. Feedback has shown Trusts have *'valued the pool of candidates'* for vacancies and having people who can *'hit the ground running'*. This has therefore been a great success for reinforcing the nature conservation workforce with skilled people, particularly for the Trusts. Whether employed by SWWT or elsewhere, the trainees also act as powerful ambassadors for the Wildlife Trusts, maintaining their links.

Wild Paths gave a focus for collaboration across SWWT. Feedback from Trusts indicated that SWWT *'collaborated extremely well'*, *'information sharing was excellent'*, the programme *'gave opportunities for extra contact between Wildlife Trusts to build on existing relationships'* and consideration that *'Trusts doing traineeships individually would be considerably less impactful'* (Staff stakeholders).

Partnership working enabled funding to be secured for medium to long term and create a programme that was *'very well set up with additional support for trainees e.g. residentials and training'*. Collaboration also added a significant dimension for trainees to be able to see how other organisations work through attending training at different Trusts and sharing experiences.

The role of the project co-ordinator and central co-ordination was greatly valued by all Trusts. One of the mentor's reflected *'It has been very useful to pool resources across SWWTs and central coordination has been key'*.

Collaboration within Trusts also helped the programme succeed, for example making trainees *'an integral part of our conservation team'*, *'being welcomed into other departments'* and staff from different teams coming together *'to run the programme with one more focused on the day to day and the other on the overall organisation, paperwork etc'*.

From an operational point of view, Wild Paths worked well through having tools in place for everyone to use with a consistent approach e.g monthly trainee record and mentor check-ins, three monthly reviews, learning styles assessment, residential training camps. NLHF funding has enabled a Toolkit to be produced by Heritage Insider using all these tools to create downloadable templates for Trusts and other organisations to use under a Creative Commons licence.

Producing a film on 'a career in nature conservation' with Gani Naylor and Samuel Crosby was an inspiring, thought provoking, moving, emotional and rewarding experience with their skills in group dynamics, creative facilitation, unobtrusive filming, putting people at ease, authentic connection and finding the stories people are nurturing in the depths. It is testament to Wild Paths that so many staff and former trainees from across all the SWWTs came forward and willingly gave their time and stories at short notice to produce a film that we hope will inspire many more people into a fulfilling career in natural heritage and show what's possible.

What didn't work well and why?

Although overall, the programme has been successful, there were some aspects where difficulties had to be overcome or where lessons have been learnt that can inform future entry-level career programmes.

The start of the Covid-19 pandemic disrupted the training programme for Cohort 2 and required a great deal of adjustment for all staff trying to deliver not only the training programme but their own work programmes under difficult circumstances. Although measures were put in place to enable Cohort 2 trainees to complete their traineeships and gain sufficient experience to be job ready, either through the 'Training at Home' framework or by deferring the last 2 months of their placements, the experience was not what it would have been without the pandemic. Trainees were also faced with a more difficult job market at the end of their placements and it was not possible to bring all the trainees together for an end of traineeship celebration.

Covid-19 also had an impact through delaying the start of Cohort 3 by one year. In this time there had been considerable changes in staff and in staff roles within Trusts leading to the need to appoint a new project co-ordinator, some county leads and many mentors. Recruiting a new Project Co-ordinator and Dorset Lead to manage the project in the final year required time for both staff to acquaint themselves with the history of the programme, requirements to successfully deliver Cohort 3, review all the resources and build relationships with other project staff.

For some, focus had shifted away from traineeships and collaboration during the pandemic, and it took a little longer than hoped to re-establish the programme while new staff across all the Trusts found their feet. For example, extra work was needed in re-defining some placements to suit changing mentors and Trust structures ready to advertise to candidates and this reduced the time available for people to make applications. However, excellent filing of information and resources and handover notes by the previous project co-ordinator coupled with sufficient experience remaining on the Steering Group proved invaluable in supporting the newer staff in re-starting and delivering the programme and any initial difficulties were overcome. This also enabled fresh ideas from newer staff to flourish. As staff change is common within the natural heritage sector this situation is often faced with projects and the benefit of ensuring good record keeping and having a Steering Group with representatives across the partnership became apparent.

Pressure also occurred when the project co-ordinator was successful in securing a new full-time role with DoWT and reduced hours to 2 days per week. Although an administrative assistant was recruited 2 days per week and all staff worked very well together, it took time to work out which aspects of the work to delegate whilst maintaining priority in continuation of contact with trainees, and to recruit a new person into a short contract. It added work for the Dorset Lead but, being a long-term member of staff, it was possible to absorb this into their work programme to enable use of a grant underspend for a project extension to finish evaluation, a toolkit and film, with four trainees benefitting from 1-month placement extensions. This showed the value of having a longer-term member of staff moved onto the project part-time

to support the new project co-ordinator as it gave stability at the end when staff churn was likely.

As with Cohort 2, Covid-19 created a level of uncertainty for Cohort 3 over whether some of the activities would be able to go ahead if infection levels rose and measures had to be put in place to reduce risk of infection, although there was an expectation around this from the start of the Cohort. A celebration was possible at the end of Cohort 3 but it was deemed sensible to just keep this to Cohort 3 and programme staff as Covid-19 rates were relatively high at this time.

Whilst the feedback from trainees was overwhelmingly positive, some found aspects of the placements challenging. In particular, some had not anticipated the level of physical fitness and practical aptitude required for a career in practical conservation work or struggled with gaining the skills for chainsaw work. Some mentors had to put in a great deal of effort building trainee confidence and encouraging them to study for their qualifications.

‘At the start of the traineeship, I found it physically demanding and I had to learn quickly what was necessary in terms of equipment and PPE as I had not worked in this type of environment before.’

(Trainee)

A suggestion made by trainees for the future is to start with brushcutting and then progress to chainsawing as confidence builds, rather than undertake training in both at the same time. For future schemes it would be worth considering whether any AQA Award Employability Units or schemes such as Barclays Life Skills could be used to help develop trainees confidence, personal organisation and preparation for the workplace early in the traineeship, or prior to starting.

Common feedback between trainees was that the traineeships were not long enough and to extend them to 12 months so they could experience more work in the summer months, *‘consolidate theoretical learning about seasonal work patterns’* and see more of their work come to fruition in the final three months.

‘12-month placement would have been better so gain experience of summer work and see work come to fruition.’

(Trainee)

This was supported by programme staff during the project review sessions:

‘Nine months duration instead of 12 months decreases benefit for DoWT and trainees – a full year is preferable.’

(Staff stakeholder)

A couple of the trainees received injuries/flare up of an issue they had had prior to the placement starting, despite all risk assessments and safety protocols being put in place. This marred their time, but each case was carefully assessed, support given and alternative training offered until they were able to resume or adapt their work programme.

A few trainees were also impacted by staff changes or organisational restructures that led to problems such as miscommunication/lack of information being forwarded, promises of locally based training that didn't transpire and needing to chase staff to provide training. This is something to be mindful of for future schemes, with staff being more aware of possible impacts on trainees though they themselves may be experiencing a difficult time.

More time and budget could also have been allocated to ongoing training for Trust staff, particularly mentors. This was front loaded so the mentors for Cohort 1 received good support but it was not anticipated that mentors would change so much between and during cohorts so mentors starting later in the programme had less training. An induction package and suggested training for a mentor could be created, to include more on managing people with diverse needs. Mentor feedback included:

'Inclusivity – if we want to diversify the workforce, we need more staff time and specialist training to be able to manage people with additional needs, for example. We didn't know what training was needed at the start but we have a clearer idea now.'

'It has been a struggle with resources. For example, those trainees who might need extra support need more time spent with them. This is especially the case in the first half of the traineeship which is particularly intensive. It is often more than what has been allocated within the project plans and funding.'

The programme team also underestimated the potential impact of long-term mental health conditions, disabilities or lack of self confidence in enabling a trainee to progress as anticipated. For example, one trainee took longer to get to grips with chainsawing and brushcutting than anticipated, and because of the risks involved with this type of work and the level of supervision required, the mentor and wider team were put under quite a lot of pressure. In some cases, individual learning profiles were developed or reasonable adjustments put in place for completing targets so that trainees could progress in a safe and measured way. Again, more training for Trust staff may have helped staff feel more comfortable in managing the situations earlier on.

Some mentors were concerned that their Trust viewed trainees as an additional member of staff and counted them as such when considering workload. *'Really trainees are 'time neutral' in the team i.e. they take a lot of time to support but also deliver work (especially in the second half of traineeships) but overall this has a neutral effect on the staffing within the team'*. It remains a challenge to balance making trainees feel part of the team and learning to work in a way that is 'job ready', whilst ensuring they are treated and respected as trainees.

A hoped-for outcome of Wild Paths was for Trusts to embed traineeships into everyday working at Trust structures. This has been especially challenging. Wild Paths is a very successful model for delivering traineeships but that success is, in part, gained through having a cohort of trainees who support each other and through significant centralised training and support. Trusts have indicated they would *'struggle to replicate something ourselves without the funded programme'* and feel

that *'if doing it, need to do it properly'* and *'have enough trainees to support each other'*.

Although Trusts are continuing to take on trainees e.g. in Dorset four are now funded through individual projects, corporate funding and private funders, and using Wild Paths materials, the trainees may not gain such an extensive experience as Wild Paths trainees who have had the benefit of residentials, shared learning and visiting other counties. That said, it is anticipated that they will still gain sufficient qualifications and experience from the traineeship to be job ready and much of the learning from Wild Paths will help make these placements as beneficial to all as possible. One suggestion made was to set up central wider support and an *'accredited centre'* with modules ready to use that any Trust could tap into.

Another point raised was a need for more clarity around finding the balance between filling the skills gap and broadening the diversity of the sector when undertaking Wild Paths recruitment. It was also expressed that recruitment possibly still favoured those who had already gained experience by volunteering and were more able therefore to demonstrate their commitment and aptitude to the placements. A suggestion for a future scheme is to offer *'taster sessions e.g. a six week introduction'* to reach more people who may not have thought of a career in the sector and wished to explore what this would be like before applying.

'..seems that most people on traineeship have voluntary experience/relevant experience prior to traineeship so maybe still hard for people to get into if they have nothing relevant previous, despite the aim of traineeship being for people who can't transition into the sector/get a foot in the door/get experience'.

(Trainee)

Although most trainees found the bursary sufficient some, for example those who had families to support, found they had to utilise savings or work part time. There were also complications found for people over certain benefits and conflicting advice being given by external agencies. Although advice had been sought from HMRC regarding the classification of the bursary, individuals needed to take advice from experts on their own more complex circumstances. This could be flagged to applicants before traineeships are taken up as staff were not always made aware of the difficulties being experienced by some trainees until late in the day. With HMRC guidance changing, this is something to re-examine for future schemes.

Although collaboration between Trusts was good, more could have been done to acknowledge, embed and celebrate the benefits of workforce diversity at institutional level e.g. *'think tanks on how to impact the wider trust and how to advocate for inclusion, discuss issues such as when volunteer paid opportunities are appropriate etc'* (Staff stakeholder). During the pandemic momentum was lost as staff (understandably) were busy adapting their own work programmes under pandemic restrictions, new staff were getting to grips with the programme and there were periods of uncertainty. Wild Paths has sown some seeds at both locally and at national level within TWT and it is hoped that all Trusts will continue to work together to become inclusive organisations with diverse work forces representative of the communities they serve.

Ten years on

Reflecting back over the ten years that the SWWT have run traineeships funded through the NLHF Skills for the Future programme, a significant amount has been achieved, and many lessons learnt.

NLHF funding of £1,681,511 (total project costs £2,047,429) has enabled 117 people to successfully complete training placements in natural heritage skills. Of these, almost 90% had gained employment in the sector within a year of completing their placements. The vast majority have stayed in the South West and over a third of Wildlife Skills and Wild Paths trainees have been employed within the host Wildlife Trusts at some point. The programme has equipped people with a set of skills, knowledge and experience that has enabled them to confidently seek employment in practical nature conservation or a variety of related occupations. This has helped to strengthen the nature conservation workforce through a period where it has become difficult to recruit employees with appropriate skills and given people a non-academic route into the sector.

Over the course of the ten years, the programme provided by SWWT has evolved with changing needs and realisation that the natural heritage sector is not as inclusive as it should be and poorly reflects society. TWT now aims to put equality, diversity and inclusion at its heart to ensure that everyone has the opportunity to experience the joy of wildlife in their daily lives inspiring, empowering and engaging people from all backgrounds, cultures, identities and abilities, to change the natural world for the better. This means creating workspaces where difference is celebrated, everyone can be themselves and flourish. Actively providing opportunities for people who may previously have experienced barriers to a career in the sector is one way to help start reaching that aim, with a hope they will themselves advocate for a more inclusive workforce in future.

Wildlife Skills and the Dorset skills programme made considerable inroads into changing the application and recruitment paradigm which favoured graduates. The success of Skills for the Future trainees in gaining employment in a wide range of organisations started to make a real difference to attitudes and a willingness and desire to select candidates based on practical skills rather than academic achievement. This has been a very important factor in diversifying the nature conservation workforce and Wild Paths has taken this a step further.

Some key things that have been learnt and developed over the course of ten years include:

1. **Dedicated staff time** is needed to adequately support traineeships and it pays to have an officer devoted to co-ordinating the programme centrally and a strong programme team with a Steering Group. Recruiting a Project Co-ordinator for the Wildlife Skills and Wild Paths schemes was invaluable in assuring a consistent approach, setting up central training, managing grant allocations, and building great relations with trainees and staff. There has also been increased recognition of the need for committed time from managers and mentors to make the programme a success. Full Cost Recovery at all staff levels needs to be built into future schemes. In the first year there was a

reluctance by some staff to become a mentor to a trainee, some worrying that trainees could be a burden – by the end of first scheme, Conservation Skills, the benefits were more tangible and staff were asking to mentor trainees. At the end of Wild Paths mentors have reflected on all the positives the opportunity has had for them both personally and within their organisations and seen that '*Wild Paths makes a difference on a daily/hourly basis*'. It has been a rewarding experience for staff involved across SWWT.

2. **Staff training and support** is needed to ensure staff feel equipped, and are able, to support trainees. Over the ten years there has been increasing resource put into staff training, but still not sufficient. A fuller staff training plan should be built into future schemes. Specialist training may be needed to meet individual trainee needs.
3. **Recruitment methods** have become more inclusive and reached more diverse audiences, for example advertising through social media, connecting to organisations with diverse audiences, enabling people to submit a video, guaranteeing interviews for those with a disability, and making the application more about potential and desire than existing knowledge and skills. This is a model that can be followed and also embedded more into general Trust recruitment. Traineeships are very popular and sought after, with much higher numbers of applicants as opposed to the number of applicants for jobs in the sector, showing the need for the offer to continue.
4. **Selection days** work well if they are relaxed and provide an opportunity for people to show their practical aptitude and passion for a career in nature conservation as well as provide a taste of what a traineeship will offer. It is beneficial to give staff clear guidance on what they are looking for in the candidates and programme aims e.g. to fill a skills gap or broaden workforce diversity. It has also been helpful to develop scoring systems for the initial sift of applications, reduce the number of placements candidates could apply for and ensure people are able to drive. A future consideration is whether traineeships are truly entry level – many of the successful candidates had already volunteered. Taster days or e.g. a six week introduction could help reach out to people new to the sector, and also give more opportunity to assess candidates.
5. **Training plans** have developed over the ten years, and it has helped to manage expectations if these are set out clearly when trainees apply for positions. A combination of formal qualifications and work-placed experience works extremely well. Trainees have valued spending time together as a cohort and networking so residential training camps and one-day get togethers have also been key. Feedback has refined residentials, finding a need for a good combination of classroom training, outdoor activity, social and down time. Trainees also benefit from seeing and experiencing all aspects of being an employee i.e. administration, management plans, staff meetings and also from personal development training such as dealing with conflict, mental health awareness, confidence and assertiveness which need building into the training plan along with support in seeking, applying for and being interviewed for jobs. These have all been developed as part of the programme.
6. **Trainee journaling, reviews and feedback, and staff reflective sessions** have been brought in for the latest cohorts under Wild Paths which helped trainees keep track of their learning, staff to deal with any issues that arose

and refined the programme. Good record keeping helps evaluate the programmes and ensure good handovers where staff change.

7. **Traineeships should be at least 12 months** to offer opportunity with maximum benefit to trainees and the organisation. Traineeship length has varied over the ten years, and many trainees found employment part way through their traineeship but both trainees and staff have agreed 12 months gives opportunity to experience work in all seasons and see the fruition of winter work. Twelve months would also enable Trusts to benefit from an increasingly skilled trainee and help balance the staff time put into the training. Starting placements in September gives a full autumn/winter to practice brushcutting and chainsaw skills, important if traineeships are shorter than 12 months.
8. **Having more trainees in a cohort is easier** to manage as training can be arranged together and creates more of a buzz in the organisation. Trainees can also offer each other mutual support, more staff are involved to lighten the load and bring in different experience and viewpoints.
9. **Trainees should be paid a fair bursary and not regarded as a member of staff when work programming.** *‘Even short term or part time volunteering roles, or even roles offered with accommodation, are still very difficult for people to manage if they need to earn a living’* (Staff stakeholder). With the clear value of employing someone that has been through a training programme, organisations need to find ways to embed paid training positions or entry level positions as the norm. Bursary payments will need aligning with current HMRC guidance when setting up a new scheme. Providing inclusive traineeships has worked well while project funded but SWWT have not yet found a way to springboard from this to core activity. Over the course of the programme there has been some concern from mentors that sometimes trainees are regarded as contributors to work programmes, when in fact they are time neutral, so this needs clarity in future schemes when work planning.
10. **Having a partnership of organisations brings benefits.** Moving the programmes from just Dorset to four, and then five, Trusts brought opportunities for collaboration, fresh ideas and differing skills, and strengthened staff relations and networking across different areas of Trust work. Trusts agreed they couldn’t have offered such a comprehensive scheme without collaborating and sharing training. Having trainees in different Trusts gave opportunities for trainees to experience different organisational set ups and benefit from different strengths and opportunities in each organisation, e.g. management of different habitats, urban/rural settings, different species. Trusts remain keen to collaborate and feel there is more that could have been done. This is something to be mindful of and planned e.g. setting up think tanks on issues such as inclusion in the workplace and entry level opportunities. There is scope to develop a central training system, perhaps nationally, train more staff and provide longer term mentoring opportunities to trainees.

Updated case studies have been made of two trainees from Skills for the Future showing the continuing progress made by former trainees over the last 8-9 years.

Emma Godden Skills for the Future Practical & Engagement Trainee 2013/14 (Dorset)



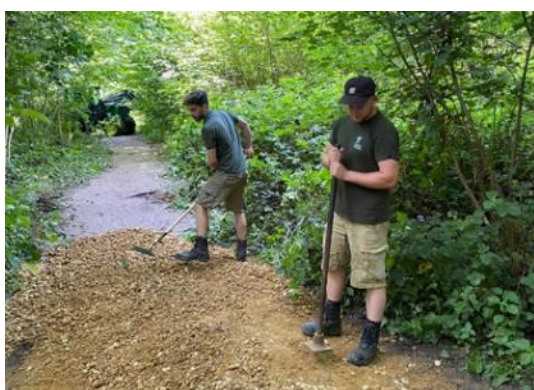
"I did my best to make a positive contribution to DoWT's work whilst a trainee and benefitted from the chance to improve my CV tremendously and that's what makes the SFF programme so attractive. I would urge anyone thinking of applying to such schemes to do so."

Emma (*second from right, above*) had a background in working in direct marketing, but she realised that she needed to change her lifestyle and work with nature to combat depression and anxiety. When Emma applied to the programme, she stated "having recently made several applications I still lack experience and qualifications to get interviews for paid positions. This scheme would help make me more employable and is valuable for the financial support it offers that I would otherwise not have if volunteering". Emma identified early on that she wanted a broad based training experience covering both engagement and practical aspects, so spent the first 6 months of her placement based at the DoWT Fine Foundation Marine Centre at Kimmeridge primarily working in engagement, and the final 6 months living and training on Brownsea Island in a practical conservation role.

Emma also said about her training year "*It's been marvelous! I have indeed been 'living the life I please' and 'doing the best I can', in training roles that I have thoroughly enjoyed this past year, whilst acquiring new skills and making the most of every opportunity that has come my way and I have never been happier*". When Emma was reminiscing about giving a marine species talk to a rowdy bunch of 50 A level students during her placement and surviving, she said "*I remember how scared I was! My, how I've come a long way since volunteering, training and working for DoWT. Will always be grateful for the development opportunities that have helped me get where I am now*".

NPTC:	CS30, CS31
LANTRA:	Brushcutter,
CIEH:	First Aid, Health and Safety, Manual Handling Forest School Level 2

Where are they now? Since the programme, Emma has gone on to work in a variety of roles including a Learning Officer for National Trust; Education Assistant for Sir Harold Hillier Gardens; Little Tern Project Assistant for RSPB; as Wildlife Supporter Officer & Engagement Officer for DoWT; Assistant Manager Honeybrook Farm, Dorset; Ranger in the Purbeck Heaths NNR for National Trust. Now a trained Forest School leader, Emma works part time in a marketing role for National Trust, and part time as Gillingham Royal Forest Project Officer for Dorset Wildlife Trust. Emma says "*It's great to be back with the very organisation that I started my conservation journey with.*"



“The traineeship helped me do things I couldn’t have done as a volunteer – learning how to use machinery, maintain equipment, supervising volunteers and even knowing how to load the landrover properly!”

“Initially I found chainsawing really difficult, as I would get nervous and overthink the situation, but as my confidence grew, it eventually got to be my favourite thing to do.”

“It sounds like a cliché but the ‘on the job’ experience enabled me to get to know the industry and the culture of working for a Wildlife Trust.”

“My traineeship experience was fun, mind-expanding, individual and full of wildlife.”

“[My advice to future trainees would be]: Use being a novice as an excuse to make as many mistakes as you can!”

Ed (above and right) held a degree in geography and had had some experience of ecological consultancy work. However, before the traineeship he had found himself back in his hometown working in a cardboard box factory, and volunteering 1 day a week at Lydiard Park. He had recently applied to 20 jobs, only 1 of which had even responded and that was only to say that he hadn’t got an interview. This was all getting him down. He quickly found his feet within one of the Dorset Wildlife Trust wardening teams, and really valued how they helped him build on his existing skills. He cites encouragement from his mentors when he was getting to grips with chainsaw work as a turning point in his personal development, as it helped him to have more confidence in himself.

FORMAL ACHIEVEMENTS

LANTRA:	Brushcutter
NPTC:	CS30/31 Chainsaw maintenance, cross-cutting & felling; PA1/PA6W pesticide application
CIEH:	First Aid Level 2; Health and Safety Level 2
AQA Unit Awards:	Coppicing woodland shrubs & trees; Hedgelaying; Planning & Wildlife Law in Dorset; Communicating through the Media ATV driving course

Where are they now? After successfully completing his traineeship, Ed went straight into full time work as Estate Worker for Wiltshire Wildlife Trust. He is now Ranger of Farthing Downs, a newly-founded 200-hectare National Nature Reserve managed by City of London. He lives on site, and manages everything from keeping the area clean to managing Ash Dieback, fencing, grounds maintenance and supervising contractors. Ed said *“A lot of the skills I use now started from the SFF project. It was the most important thing in influencing my career path. The traineeship was the turning point in my employability”*.

Legacy

The Wild Paths programme has left a legacy of the following:

- New and diverse talent reinforcing the natural heritage sector workforce through training of 29 individuals to be 'job ready', and 90% working within the sector within 6 months. SWWT benefitting through employment of 13 former trainees.
- 29 people who have benefitted from often 'life changing' training and personal development and who have become effective employees and are likely to advocate for inclusive workforce practices in the future.
- SWWT staff trained in inclusive workforce practices with experience of putting that into practice. Staff have gained experience in line management and providing training, benefitted from additional help in delivering work programmes e.g. through reducing lone working, and found mentoring trainees rewarding.
- A toolkit to facilitate delivery of inclusive traineeships, available to all organisations through a Creative Commons Licence, hosted on Dorset Wildlife Trust's website. This includes sections on:
 - the case for inclusive traineeships
 - running a traineeship programme
 - recruiting diverse trainees
 - trainee development
- Accessible and inclusive recruitment methodology that can be applied more widely in recruitment processes.
- A film on 'a career in nature conservation' that can be used to encourage people into the natural heritage sector and show it is accessible to people from all backgrounds.
- Greater collaboration between SWWT with strengthened links between staff members.
- Advocacy within SWWT and the natural heritage sector for more inclusive workforces and EDI practices.
- Increased ability of SWWT to engage and empower more diverse communities and share in the movement to reverse the climate and ecological emergency.

Conclusions and recommendations

The end of Wild Paths is the culmination of ten years providing entry-level traineeships, during which there has been a continual process of learning and refinement.

The key theme of Wild Paths was ‘new talent and diversity’. Wild Paths has been undeniably successful, met its approved purposes and exceeded its original targets.

Approved purpose	Outcomes
To deliver 30, 9-month long trainee placements in practical conservation skills, engagement skills and transferable/complementary skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 29 placements completed and 100% job ready. • 1 placement not completed as personal barriers not overcome. • 1 placement withdrawn after 1 month for change to career in wildlife art. • 29 trainees with chainsaw, brushcutting, and first aid qualifications. • 316 AQA Unit Award accreditations. • 90% in employment within 6 months (target 75%). • 13 (45%) in employment with SWWT at some point since completing training (target 10%). • Toolkit to facilitate delivery of inclusive traineeships produced.
Placements will be delivered across five Wildlife Trusts: Avon, Devon, Dorset, Somerset and Wiltshire	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2 work-based placements delivered in each county, each year, for 3 years.
To diversify the conservation workforce by providing opportunities for people from disadvantaged and excluded backgrounds	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New recruitment methods successful: 77% of trainees from backgrounds traditionally underrepresented in the natural heritage workforce or at risk of exclusion, for example with a disability or long-term health condition, from ethnic minority groups including People of Colour, not educated to degree level, or from backgrounds of less opportunity (target 50%). • Film produced to encourage more people into the sector.

Wild Paths has made a real and significant **difference to people**. It has enabled people to gain a better understanding of the opportunities for working in nature conservation and provided new careers for a diversity of people who may have found barriers to entering the natural heritage sector. Trainees have benefitted from gaining new sector specific skills and knowledge, qualifications, formal accreditations and enhanced employability. They have also developed leadership and management skills in engaging with communities and volunteers, boosted personal confidence and self-esteem, and effectiveness in seeking and securing employment. For many it has been ‘*life-changing*’. This has brought new talent into the sector, people who will go on to further roles, become managers and leaders and advocate for inclusion in the future.

The experience of partners demonstrates that having trainees based within an organisation makes a major contribution at all levels. The opportunity to pass on skills and knowledge and witness trainees thrive has been a highly enriching and rewarding experience for staff involved in training and mentoring. Staff have also benefitted by engaging with a wider range of people, developing their own teaching, mentoring and coaching skills and gaining knowledge and confidence in advocating for, and practicing equality, equity, diversity and inclusion. Feedback has though identified a need to make more provision for staff training and time in future schemes.

The training of 29 individuals and the diversification of the nature heritage workforce will also make a **difference to communities**. Bringing newly skilled people into the workforce at a time when organisations are struggling to recruit high quality candidates will lead to better management of natural heritage assets, many of which are important community greenspaces, enjoyed by people and contributing to their health and wellbeing.

Diversifying the natural heritage workforce, and giving staff skills to work with people from different backgrounds and with different needs, as has been achieved by Wild Paths, will provide a tangible link with more people from different sectors of society. It is hoped that this will enable many more people to feel that the natural world is relevant to them, confident and empowered to participate in natural heritage activities and become part of the movement taking action for the future of natural heritage conservation.

Wild Paths has also made a **difference to the organisations involved and to the natural heritage sector**. The programme has provided strong evidence that there is a high demand for a non-academic entry-level route into nature conservation and that this route can provide high quality skilled employees, drawn from all parts of society, who are committed to conserving the natural heritage. At a time when recruitment into posts has become difficult in the sector, the trainees have been much needed and very welcome recruits into both host and external organisations.

The programme has enabled organisations to try out and refine different ways of recruiting and managing trainees, benefit from the fresh ideas, challenges to thinking and enthusiasm that trainees bring, and support staff with some extra capacity to manage work programmes, e.g. without lone working, whilst delivering training. However, without centralised support and funding, Trusts have acknowledged that they would not easily be able to offer traineeships at the same level as Wild Paths.

To continue diversifying the sector and move away from people having to volunteer to gain experience, and to rely less on project funding, the sector needs to find a way to provide more entry level opportunities as the norm. One recommendation is to explore the setting up of 'centres of excellence' with accredited training, investing in training on a regional and national level to provide inclusive traineeships for people both starting out or changing careers.

Whilst working through a Theory of Change with Heritage Insider, the ultimate aim of Wild Paths was defined as 'At institutional level acknowledge, embed and celebrate the benefits of workforce diversity'. Wild Paths has played a part in advocating for a

more diverse workforce and for more focus on EDI within Trusts but there is much further to go. With the sector generally gaining awareness of its lack of inclusion and diversity, sharing learnings from Wild Paths could support others to develop and deliver more inclusive traineeships or entry level positions.

Possible next steps include developing standards on the provision of paid early career positions to avoid cases where volunteering becomes exploitation, advocating for active inclusion and developing Trust policies, providing more taster opportunities for people new to natural heritage and showing that a career in nature conservation is available to all. There is perhaps opportunity for a follow-on project that uses traineeships as a springboard to embed entry-level opportunities and EDI further into Wildlife Trusts with a vision that the workforce should reflect the society it represents.

Recommendations	Actions required
Adjust future trainee programmes to reflect learnings from Wild Paths	Wild Paths Steering group to discuss / add to toolkit: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Include dedicated staff time and FCR for managers. • Provide fuller staff training plan and consider option for long term mentors to trainees post placement/in early career. • Restrict candidates to applying for first and second choices only of placements, and require need for driving licence. • Consider true entry level e.g. Offer taster sessions or six week starter courses, make use of 'employability' training – this could also help assess true commitment and ability to succeed. • Make residentials a good mix of classroom and outdoor learning, social activities and downtime. • More one-day collective training and opportunities to visit/swap Trusts. • Expand traineeships to at least 12 months. • Ensure trainees seek advice on individual financial circumstances as necessary. • Make allowance for staff churn. • Dedicate time for collaborative 'think-tanks'.
Set up 'centre of excellence' with accredited training	Wild Paths Steering Group to discuss. Approach RSWT and potential partner organisations for wider discussion and potential modelling. Consider investment model and sources of funding, possible partners. Consider follow on project to embed entry-level opportunities and EDI into TWT.
Develop standards for early career positions	Wild Paths Steering Group to discuss. Involve TWT Volunteer Managers Group and RSWT.
Advocate for inclusive traineeships and careers in nature conservation	Promote learnings from Wild Paths through TWT, Local Nature Partnerships etc. Share Wild Paths Toolkit. Share film on a career in nature conservation, use at careers events, on websites, promote through social media. Advocate value of inclusion and continue to move forwards to be inclusive organisations.

Appendices (see separate document)

- 1 End of Project Learning Reviews (Dorset, Somerset, mentors)
- 2 Evaluation of recruitment data
- 3 Feedback from Project Staff/Mentors Residential Training, Brownsea July 2018
- 4 Feedback and reflective sessions from Trainee residentials/general feedback (Cohorts 1-3)
- 5 Example feedback from individual training session
- 6 Trainees exit interviews
- 7 Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Training and opportunities through TWT
- 8 Contents of Trainees Folder
- 9 Employment of Trainees after placements
- 10 E-learning and AQA Unit options
- 11 Example training programme 2021-22 and Covid -19 training at home programme (April-May 2019)