

REPORT
EVALUATION

NATUREWORKS

@ Denbies Wine Estate, Dorking

March - October 2025



Report produced by
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Intended Outcomes

Participants from underrepresented communities access the Surrey Hills National Landscape

Participants gain hands-on experience of heritage skills and conservation in the Surrey Hills countryside

Participants learn skills to reduce stress, fatigue, isolation, anxiety, and depression

The Heritage Hub at Denbies will be developed in collaboration with community members, ensuring the legacy of the project as groups can continue to use the site in the future.

Young adults attend inclusive, nature-based wellbeing sessions at the Heritage Hub Community Garden

Participants are empowered to conserve, protect, and champion nature

Social value outcomes will be maximized for people, communities, health, skills, employment, environment, climate change



What did we do?

- Participants submitted an application and met with the Programme Coordinator for an informal interview (to gauge and ensure motivation) prior to joining the programme.
- From March to October 2025, weekly sessions took place at the Heritage Hub Community Garden at Denbies Wine Estate.
- 2.5-hour sessions consisted of practical gardening tasks, heritage skills, therapeutic horticulture, wildlife conservation and wellbeing activities to deepen connection to nature.
- At the start and end of the programme, participants completed baseline evaluation questionnaires.
- The Programme Coordinator supported volunteers with individual transport plans and transport costs were reimbursed.
- Volunteers were provided PPE, tools, and refreshments.



What happened?

Each session followed a predictable rhythm:

- Welcome circle and check in.
- Seasonal, practical tasks to teach heritage, conservation, and horticultural skills.
- Sensory tasks, creative or reflective activities.
- Closing circle and closing reflections.
- Optional “homework” was set each week – a simple nature connection challenge, designed to encourage participants to engage with nature when they are on their own, outside of the sessions.



Who took part?

- 11 young people aged 19-27 took part in the programme from March - October 2025.
- Eight identified as male, and three as female.
- Eight participants were neurodivergent.
- Geographically, they were spread across Surrey. Four travelled by train to the site, the others got lifts from parents/carers.



- Nine participants said they have a physical or mental health condition or illnesses lasting or expected to last 12 months or more.
- Five identified as 'White British' or 'White Other', one as 'Black-African', one as ' Mixed - Black African & White', one as 'Mixed - Black African & White', and one as 'Hispanic'.



27 NatureWorks Sessions were delivered

At the end of their engagement, participants scored how much they agreed with the following statements

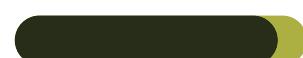
I have developed nature-based skills from attending sessions

 95%

The skills I have developed will be useful in my everyday life?

 90%

This project has given me the opportunity to participate in activities that i wouldn't usually do.

 90%

I would recommend this project to others.

 95%



On average, participants' wellbeing scores increased by 19%

Before

 58%

After

 77%

Outcomes

Wellbeing scores, on average, increased by **19%**

Nature-based skills, on average, increased by **16%**

Self-confidence, on average, increased by **12%**

Confidence in using public transport, on average, increased by **7%**

Heritage skills, on average, increased by **9%**

Nature connectedness scores, on average, increased by **4%**

Participants were asked about the skills they developed

“ I have learned how to grow and care for different types of plants.

“ Permaculture techniques like companion planting and building a herb spiral.

“ How to identify different trees and plants.

“ The sessions have helped me with socialising.

“ New creative skills. I enjoyed the arty stuff.

“ Supporting vegetable growth using different tools with unique methods.

“ How to attract wildlife by assembling bug hotels and different habitats.

“ I learned about the benefits of using heritage seed varieties

“ I have become more able to use public transport.

“ Mindfulness

“ Green woodworking

“ Foraging skills

“ I have planted seeds, bulbs, potatoes and other plants. Created structures for plants to grow up.

“ Identifying different species of birds, insects and plants.

Participants were asked what helped them develop these skills

I'd say being in a supportive environment and getting involved.

Having a regular place to go each week to spend time with people and do something productive.

Being in a supported group with others who share similar interests and similar challenges to me.

My passion for the outdoors.

knowing I can go at my own pace and not feel pressured

The staff, and to some extent, myself and other participants.

People showing me how to do things.



Case Study: Sophie

Sophie (not her real name) joined the programme experiencing high levels of social anxiety and uncertainty about her future. While initially reserved, especially in group discussions, her confidence and willingness to participate grew steadily through her involvement in outdoor tasks.

Sophie's confidence grew significantly in smaller group or one-to-one settings, and she began offering support to others (e.g., assisting with weeding) and contributing with humour and enthusiasm. Importantly, she began to reframe some of her perfectionist tendencies — using the metaphor of the knots in her woodwork to embrace uniqueness over uniformity.

By the final session, Sophie was actively participating in learning tasks like tree ID and foraging, demonstrating a real shift from isolation to engagement. She expressed pride in her learning and a growing motivation to pursue conservation-related opportunities. She expressed a newly-found connection to the Surrey Hills landscape, providing not only therapeutic benefit but also a clearer sense of purpose.

She wrote in an email to me, "Not to be dramatic but this honestly been life-changing for me! When I had [severe mental illness] I never thought I'd even be able to leave the house again, let alone contribute to something meaningful like conservation".

Having been very ill for a long time, she has never had a job but is now embarking on "a career that I'm passionate about, while contributing to nature recovery."

Sophie successfully applied for a bursary to attend a residential ecology skills training programme. She has recently been appointed as a volunteer with two conservation charities.

Case Study: Ahmed

Ahmed (not his real name) is a young asylum seeker. He attends college, is a keen gardener and enjoys being outside. A very competent young man, Ahmed was keen to increase social integration and practise his English language skills, whilst being out in nature.

Ahmed's strong practical skills and preference for hands-on tasks were evident from the beginning. Throughout the sessions, he was intentionally paired with participants who shared his interest in physical tasks (e.g herb spiral construction) to encourage peer interaction and informal language use.

Creative or reflective tasks were noticeably less comfortable for Ahmed, particularly where verbal expression was needed. However, he began to show more willingness to speak and share, especially when the content was something he could relate to.

Ahmed's journey through the NatureWorks programme highlighted a significant increase in his social integration and comfort within the group. Over time, Ahmed began contributing more verbally, even sharing personal anecdotes.

Ahmed showed empathy and a consistent willingness to help others, even when verbal communication was limited. By the final sessions, Ahmed had formed a positive bond with several other participants, and was seen as a respected and reliable group member. His preference for hands-on activities became a valuable, low-pressure opportunity through which he could practise English conversationally, supporting both language development and a growing sense of belonging.

Case Study: Tom

Tom (not his real name) has additional learning needs, is care experienced and was socially isolated when he joined the programme. Passionate about the outdoors and keen to find paid work, negative experiences with non-inclusive employers had left Tom struggling with low confidence.

By understanding Tom's preferred learning style, facilitators ensured that Tom was supported to gain new skills and knowledge. The 'no pressure' atmosphere enabled Tom to work at his own pace and to feel psychologically safe to ask for further help when needed.

Throughout engagement with the programme, a person-centred approach and celebration of achievements helped to increase Tom's self-esteem and confidence. Tom has engaged in meaningful discussions on many different topics, evidencing that he is a deep thinker with lots of wisdom to share. An inclusive setting has empowered Tom to engage in a range of heritage conservation skills. Although he still experiences low self-belief, Tom now knows that he will thrive in the right environment.

Tom has subsequently attended first aid training and is now taking part in other conservation volunteering and training projects within the Surrey Hills National Landscape. Tom has also been referred to a mental health charity for therapeutic support.

NatureWorks for Waythrough

A one-off NatureWorks session engaged a group of 10 adults from Waythrough, a local mental health support service.

Waythrough summarised their experience:

We began with coffee and conversation, followed by an engaging discussion on the scientifically supported benefits of nature for both mental and physical health. The group then got creative, painting terracotta pots and planting broad beans—each one a hopeful promise of spring growth.

Our visit included time in the lovingly maintained Heritage Garden, where we created mindful collages using flowers and greenery. The peaceful surroundings encouraged reflection, creativity, and meaningful social interaction.



Throughout the day, participants shared their thoughts:

- *“Feel so much more relaxed outside.”*
- *“Great to be with one another and have time to chat and spend time together.”*
- *“How lovely to be in such a beautiful area of natural beauty and be able to mindfully appreciate the colours and textures of nature.”*
- *“Felt good to be removed from the worries of the world which although we know are still there seem further away when outside and enjoying nature.”*

It was a truly enriching experience—one that reminded us of the healing power of nature and the joy of shared moments.

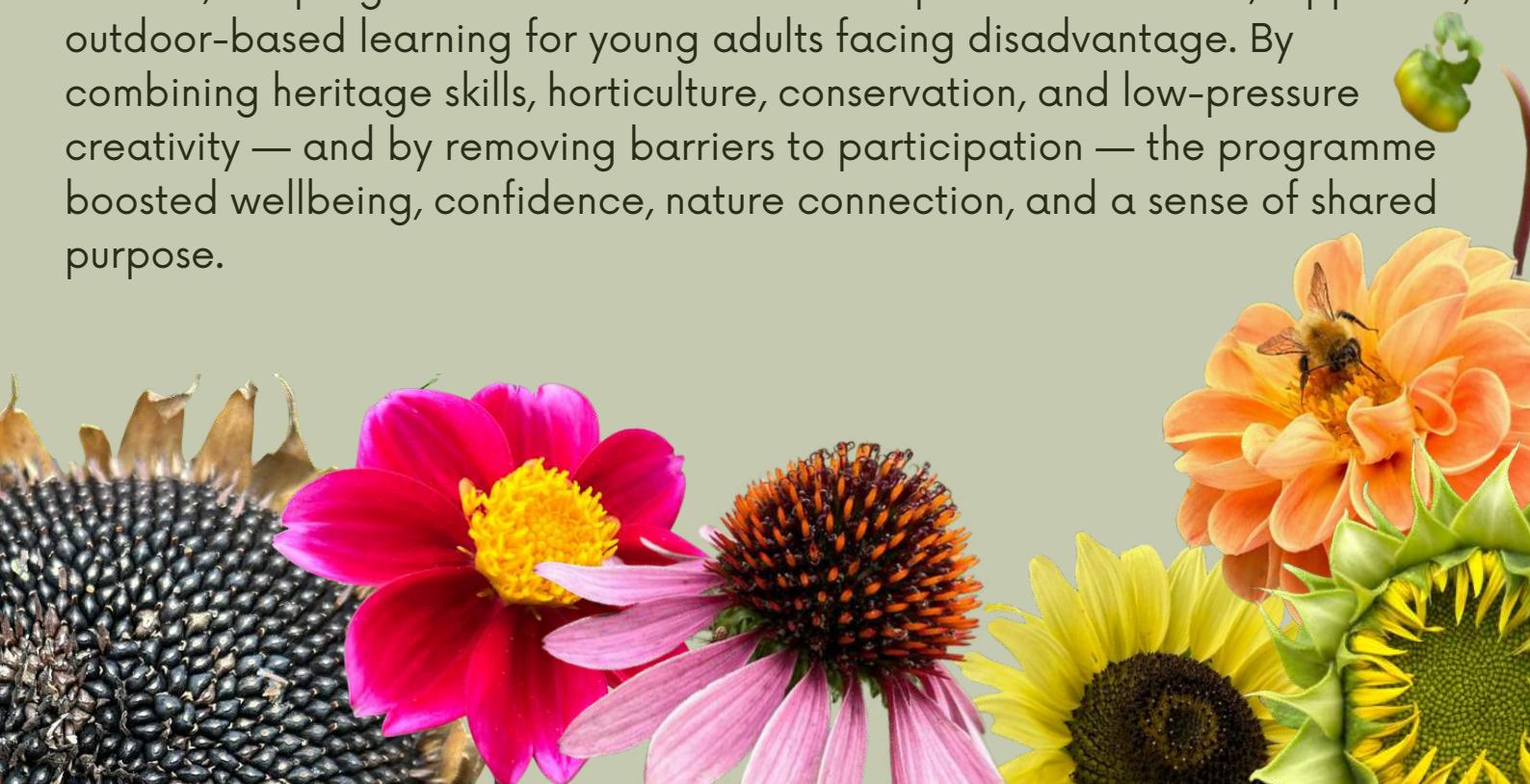
Programme Coordinator's Summary

The group consisted of young adults from diverse backgrounds. Throughout the programme, several core elements consistently contributed to its success. The regular weekly rhythm — welcome circle, practical tasks, creative or reflective activities, and a closing check-out — created predictability and security for participants managing anxiety, neurodivergence, or social isolation.

Long-term engagement allowed confidence and relationships to build gradually, while practical support such as reimbursed travel costs removed common barriers to attendance. Participants appreciated having a purposeful place to go each week, learning at their own pace, and being part of a group where expectations were clear but pressure was low.

Heritage skills formed an important thread throughout the programme, giving participants a meaningful link to local landscape traditions. Activities such as building a herb spiral, learning basic green-woodworking techniques, exploring heritage seed varieties, and applying traditional planting and companion planting methods helped participants develop both practical skills and a deeper sense of place within the Surrey Hills landscape.

Overall, the programme demonstrated the impact of consistent, supportive, outdoor-based learning for young adults facing disadvantage. By combining heritage skills, horticulture, conservation, and low-pressure creativity — and by removing barriers to participation — the programme boosted wellbeing, confidence, nature connection, and a sense of shared purpose.



NATUREWORKS

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NatureWorks was delivered by Air Time CIC as part of Growing Together, a project that empowered those with a disability, neurodiversity or from a minority ethnic background, to feel more confident in accessing natural heritage to support their wellbeing.

Growing Together was made possible with thanks to the National Lottery Heritage Fund.

