



# Beyond Recruitment: Building Belonging in Environmental Movements

**Environmental Leadership Programme**

Share, Learn, Improve Report - Autumn 2025



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**This project would not be possible without funding from The National Lottery's Climate Action Fund.**

*"If we are intent upon answering our most serious questions, from climate change to poverty, and curing diseases to designing new products, we need to work with people who think differently, not just accurately."*

Matthew Syed, Rebel Ideas: The Power of Diverse Thinking



*"In 2021, UNICEF declared the climate crisis to be a child rights crisis. The biggest risks for young people concern air pollution, climate change, and damage to the natural environment. **If you're growing up in Britain today you will be impacted in two ways – the impact now, plus the impact you will experience for the rest of your life.** Your age, gender, ethnicity, and household income level will affect how you are impacted, and how severely."*

New Philanthropy Capital,  
'How will the climate and nature crises impact young people?'  
May 2023

# Preface

Climate change and nature loss will have a disproportionate impact on young people. Yet this segment of society is often overlooked, or organisations struggle to bring them into environmental conversations in truly meaningful and sustained ways. Given the accelerating pace of environmental challenges and the critical need for diverse perspectives in developing solutions, understanding how to effectively engage young people has become both urgent and essential.

This report documents part of our learning journey - imperfect, ongoing, and offered in the spirit of collective improvement across the environmental movement.

We hope it contributes to more effective diverse recruitment practices and deeper understanding of belonging for young people in environmental spaces.



Graphic: NPC's Everyone's Environment visual summary.

# Executive summary

This report is for environmental organisations seeking to increase their reach into diverse communities, youth practitioners wanting effective collaboration approaches, and funders interested in sustainable movement building. The environmental sector recognises that tackling climate change requires diverse perspectives, yet meaningful youth engagement remains a challenge. Understanding how to shift from transactional outreach to genuine community partnerships has become essential for building the collective power needed for sustained environmental action.

The Environmental Leadership Programme 2 (ELP2) supports 18-25 year olds from underrepresented and underserved communities across the West Midlands to develop their leadership skills, their real world experience, and their connection with nature. Funded by The National Lottery Community Fund's Climate Action Fund, the programme is led by The Royal Society of Wildlife Trusts in partnership with Shropshire Wildlife Trust. Despite centring access and inclusion from the inception of the ELP2, with accessible materials, building partnerships, and centring youth voices, the project has found the recruitment and retention of truly diverse cohorts a challenge since launching in 2023. Like others, the programme has struggled to meaningfully engage the diverse young people (ages 18-25) it seeks across the West Midlands.

This insight project, as part of ELP2's dedicated Share, Learn, Improve function, explores the challenges associated with traditional recruitment where we have previously focussed on \*inclusion\*: getting diverse people into existing programmes. It reflects on wider organisational developments and practices within The Wildlife Trusts and wider sector insights to ask how can we move away from 'inclusion' to a more meaningful practice of \*belonging\*: creating environmental spaces that diverse young people feel ownership of and can authentically shape. This shift, from transactional outreach to genuine community partnership, will underpin not only how we deliver the ELP2 over the next two years of the project, but will also support the foundation of the project's legacy development.

This report captures our learning journey so far, including:

- Development of ongoing, all-year-round "Green Pathways" workshops offering genuine career value independent of whether anyone applied to our programme
- Practitioner research with youth workers to understand their constraints and partnership needs
- Conversations with partner organisations about \*their\* goals, not our recruitment targets, and our first external cross-sector sharing event
- Development of new partnerships, both within the environmental movement and across the wider youth sector
- Development of our data collection and impact measurement, to align more to our shift towards movement building and impact, and away from Key Performance Indicators.

The report draws upon three core principles:

1. Adapt to community contexts - meet communities where they are rather than expecting them to adapt to us.
2. Create genuine value - align with young people's priorities (financial stability, career development) not just environmental passion.
3. Build authentic partnerships - invest months not weeks; contribute to partner goals; extend beyond single recruitment cycles.

Ultimately our report demonstrates that diverse recruitment isn't a marketing challenge, it's a relationship challenge that requires us to transform our environmental spaces, not just diversify who enters them.



# Context and background

The Environmental Leadership Programme 2 (ELP2) supports 18-25 year olds from underrepresented and underserved communities across the West Midlands to develop their connection with nature and environmental leadership skills. Funded by The National Lottery Community Fund's Climate Action Fund, the programme is led by The Royal Society of Wildlife Trusts in partnership with Shropshire Wildlife Trust, aligning with The Wildlife Trusts' strategic priorities around community mobilising and organising, and building a more diverse movement.

Effective engagement requires moving beyond traditional recruitment toward community organising approaches that prioritise building collective power and ensuring communities can continue environmental action independently of supporting organisations, as demonstrated by The Wildlife Trusts' 'Team Wilder' community organising approach. This shift is critical for the Trusts' and wider movement's effectiveness. Complex environmental challenges demand diverse perspectives and innovative solutions that only emerge when people from varied backgrounds feel genuine ownership over environmental spaces. Community organising principles that centre belonging enable diverse young people to reshape environmental work itself, leading to more culturally relevant solutions, stronger community networks, and sustained action beyond individual programmes. This approach doesn't just strengthen representation, it holds space within the movement's for underrepresented groups to develop creative, contextually appropriate responses while building the power necessary for systemic change.

## The challenge: a changing landscape for youth engagement

The past decade has transformed how young people engage with development programmes, creating recruitment challenges for programmes like ours. These changes represent structural, financial, and cultural shifts that traditional recruitment methods simply cannot navigate. The challenges discussed in this section are further exaggerated when considered in the light of Covid-19 and the ongoing impacts on young people's connectivity, including the changes in value put upon extracurricular activities, and the impact lockdowns and isolation has had on young people's social batteries.

Structurally, the UK has experienced a dramatic collapse in youth infrastructure with 73% decline in spending on youth services in England and 27% in Wales in over the last 15 years (YMCA, 2025). This represents more than £1.2 billion, leading to the closure of more than half of the country's youth clubs. Simultaneously, traditional pathways through universities and colleges have become severely restricted, with data protection regulations limiting institutional access and course leaders facing stricter protocols about sharing external opportunities.

In today's rapidly evolving digital landscape, youth engagement is being reshaped. This is not only in terms of how young people participate in programmes, but also in how they are first engaged. The ELP2 team's experience, alongside recent studies, show that young people use social media for most of their information sourcing, generally engaging passively and relying on algorithms to curate the news and information that reaches them (The Wildlife Trusts, 2024). This means, without infiltrating the algorithm, even the best online content may never reach its intended audience.

### About 'Team Wilder'

Team Wilder was developed in the early 2020's and rolled out across the Wildlife Trusts movement with support from The Royal Society of Wildlife Trusts, becoming integrated into The Wildlife Trusts' 2030 Strategy. It addresses the gap between people caring about nature and taking action.

The approach is based on research showing that when one in four people (25%) take action, it creates a social tipping point that changes majority behaviour. Team Wilder mobilises this critical mass through five principles: nature connectedness, learning and skills, behaviour change, empowerment and action, and movement building. It represents a shift where Wildlife Trusts now focus on supporting community-led campaigning rather than leading themselves.

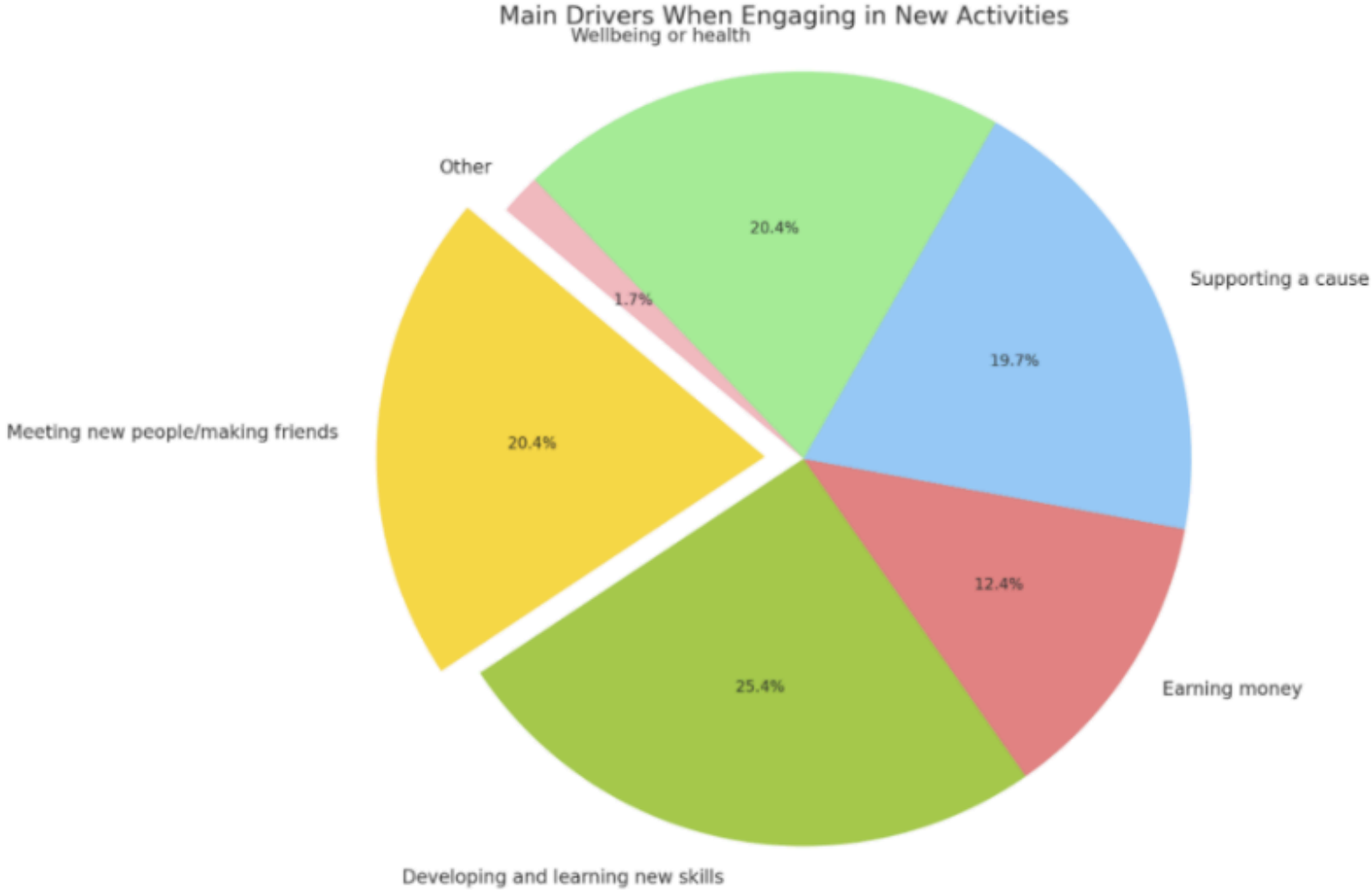
Team Wilder is now integrated into The Wildlife Trust's work, combining nature recovery, community and youth activism. It's positioned as a people-powered movement for nature's recovery, not a marketing campaign, with emphasis on empowerment and collective action.

This supports other findings that whilst content creation in online spaces offers meaningful engagement for some groups of young people, there has been a shift towards primarily engaging in passive ways. Young people are now more likely to engage by 'liking' or 'following' accounts, rather than through sharing or posting content on accounts like Instagram and TikTok.

Our learning over the past years highlights that engagement in online settings is a multidimensional concept, encompassing presence, interaction, community-building, collaboration, and emotional investment (UpRising, 2022). These dimensions are just as relevant at the recruitment stage as they are during programme delivery. Young people may be interested in development opportunities but face barriers that prevent them from responding to outreach or completing sign-up processes. These barriers must be considered at every stage of the participant journey, and specifically at the initial and early engagement stage of 'recruitment', not just once a programme begins.

UpRising's report identifies a range of factors that inhibit engagement, many of which apply equally to recruitment. These include digital poverty, such as limited access to devices, data, or quiet spaces, as well as competing responsibilities like work, study, or caring duties. Mental health and wellbeing are critical considerations, with feelings of anxiety, low confidence, and isolation often deterring young people from taking the first step (UpRising, 2022). The challenges are particularly significant for underrepresented and underserved groups, who may face multiple, intersectional barriers to typical engagement.

Despite many development programmes, including the ELP2, offering 'free' opportunities, the financial aspect of participation. Hidden costs (such as equipment, and software) and loss of potential earnings also need to be considered. Research shows that 68% of young people cite low pay and financial insecurity as dominant barriers to participation. On a similar note, 74% reported feeling pressured to undertake unpaid work to access opportunities within the green sector. Viewed alongside statistics showing only 5% receiving relevant green skills training at secondary school and 60% feeling they lack foundational climate and nature knowledge upon leaving education, the challenges are clear. Young people require more support and stewardship to access flexible opportunities, while facing financial constraints that prevent them accessing traditional unpaid "entry routes" (UpRising and YFF, 2024).



*Motivations to engage with environmental programmes – graph from Next Gen Changemakers report by The Wildlife Trusts, 2024.*

Recent research from The Wildlife Trusts (2024) indicates that young people demonstrate strong environmental connection, with over three-quarters of survey respondents finding nature relevant or very relevant to their daily lives, and 72% expressing similar feelings about climate action. These findings were consistently reinforced through interviews and focus groups, where participants shared diverse ways that environmental issues intersect with their personal experiences.



However, environmental concerns exist within a complex landscape of competing priorities that shape young people's engagement patterns. Understanding these broader motivations and challenges is crucial for environmental programmes seeking to engage meaningfully with young people.

Family support emerged as the strongest motivator (33%), followed closely by financial stability (30%) and career satisfaction (27%). Personal development and fulfilment motivated 24% of participants, while health and wellness (18%), education (16%), and social/environmental causes (11%) were also primary drivers for many respondents (The Wildlife Trusts, 2024).

Financial pressures topped young people's challenges (31%), followed by time management difficulties (27%) and mental health concerns (22%). Work-life balance troubled 17% of participants, while academic pressures (8%), health issues (10%), housing stability (6%), and future uncertainty (11%) presented additional barriers. These insights also demonstrate how immediate personal concerns often take precedence over broader societal issues during this phase of life (The Wildlife Trusts, 2024).

While young people feel strong connections to nature and climate issues, environmental engagement occurs within competing priorities and practical constraints. **With financial stability, career satisfaction, and family support as primary motivators, this suggests that effective environmental programmes must demonstrate clear value propositions aligned with these existing priorities rather than expecting environmental passion alone to drive participation.**

With the back drop of youth led action such as 2018's Fridays for Future and School Strike for Climate across the UK, rising eco-anxiety among environmentally conscious young people requires programmes to carefully consider how their recruitment approaches address wellbeing rather than potentially exacerbating these issues (UpRising and YFF, 2024; NPC, 2023). We must also consider that the young people participating in these actions are also the same young people who two years later had their future pathways and journeys interrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Exacerbating existing inequalities and bringing issues of isolation and wellbeing to the forefront of many young people's social experiences, the pandemic had lasting

impacts on young people's social skills and wellbeing, adding an additional layer of uncertainty and transition to an already complex life stage (The Wildlife Trusts, 2024).

### **The journey from inclusion to belonging (and recruitment to movement building)**

The recruitment strategy up until Year 3 of the ELP2 project focused on traditional accessibility approaches. The team developed inclusive materials through testing our recruitment flyers and information with focus groups of alumni and the internal Equality, Diversity and Inclusion team, ensuring they were accessible and inclusive for diverse groups of young people. With half the programme team having previously worked within the youth development charity, UpRising, there was already a good understanding and awareness of the barriers that come with environmental initiatives. These include young people not feeling welcome, and nature-focussed development opportunities too often being centred around a privileged understanding of the impacts of climate change and biodiversity loss - often rural, inaccessible or inconvenient and not relevant to the priorities and challenges faced by people experiencing the complex phase of life between the ages of 18-30 termed 'emerging adulthood' (The Wildlife Trusts, 2024). The team aimed to build recruitment partnerships with universities and youth organisations, and to optimise ELP2's online and social media outreach with a programme micro-site and specific accounts for the programme on YouTube and Instagram where we knew many young people were already connecting. Young people were involved in material development and the delivery team worked carefully to put accessible engagement at the heart of the ELP2's participant experience, but despite these efforts, the programme was falling short of retaining large diverse cohorts.

This challenge was further explored upon the transfer of the Environmental Leadership Programme from its previous lead organisation, UpRising, to The Royal Society of Wildlife Trusts in February 2025 along with the entire programme team. Whilst this move might appear a simple shift in homes for the programme, in actuality this shift revealed something crucial about how the team now understand

the programme's role within the environmental movement - no longer delivering an environmental project within a youth development organisation – now a project connecting young people from diverse communities to an organisation representing the wider environmental movement. Our role had fundamentally changed and we understand the reimagining of 'recruitment' to be a significant part of this, with a bigger emphasis on bringing young people into the movement, rather than just onto the programme.

This reframing led us to ask fundamentally different questions about what we were trying to achieve and why traditional approaches weren't working at scale, despite our best intentions.

### Understanding belonging vs. inclusion

One way to understand the distinction between inclusion and belonging is to consider the questions each approach prioritises. Inclusion asks, "How do we get diverse people into our existing environmental spaces and programmes?" It focuses on access and representation, seeking to expand participation within established structures, and can often be measured through demographic data and participation rates.

Belonging can be seen to ask a fundamentally different question: "How do we create environmental spaces and programmes that diverse people feel ownership of and can authentically shape?" **This approach focuses on power distribution, meaningful voice, and cultural transformation.** This reflects community organising principles demonstrated in The Wildlife Trusts' 'Team Wilder' approach (explained on page 7) that start by understanding what action people want to take, building reciprocal trusted relationships where organisations support community goals rather than focusing solely on their own needs. It requires understanding lived experience, measuring genuine influence, and assessing long-term engagement patterns that reflect sustained connection rather than temporary participation.

The contrast matters because inclusion, while valuable, can sometimes inadvertently maintain existing power structures by adding diverse faces to unchanged systems. Where inclusion might celebrate increased diversity in programme attendance,

belonging examines whether those diverse participants feel empowered to influence programme direction. Where inclusion might track demographic representation in leadership roles, belonging investigates whether those leaders can bring their authentic selves and perspectives to their work without compromising their effectiveness or acceptance. The team have looked carefully at how this learning can be embedded into year 3 of the ELP2, for example through updating the Power, Privilege and Identity session to incorporate belonging, and also through embedding community organising further in the delivery of the Nature Connection Campaigns element of the programme.

Belonging recognises that truly welcoming diverse young people requires environmental spaces to evolve, adapt, and transform in response to the experiences, wisdom, perspectives, and approaches they bring.

### The architecture of belonging

The Wildlife Trusts is developing an understanding of belonging, using an approach that sees teams understand the different ingredients that set the foundations for people to feel they belong to an organisation. Drawing on literature and learning from our own practice, we have developed an understanding that sees belonging to require five interconnected pillars that create environments where individuals flourish together.

1. Inclusive leadership means actively championing diverse perspectives young people bring to sustainability challenges, fundamentally reshaping how environmental decisions are made by ensuring diverse voices influence strategic direction from the ground up.
2. Authentic communication moves beyond tokenistic consultation toward honest, transparent dialogue about power, privilege, and whose knowledge counts in environmental decision-making. This develops the trust and connection essential for belonging.
3. Recognition and appreciation extends beyond individual achievements to celebrate how different communities understand and engage with environmental issues, championing the unique solutions and approaches they bring from their

cultural contexts.

4. Personal growth and development empowers young people to develop and lead innovative approaches that reflect their communities' wisdom, creating advancement pathways that don't require abandoning cultural identity or community connection.
5. Cultural integration requires environmental organisations to evolve their values and practices to align with diverse communities they serve. Rather than expecting adaptation to existing frameworks, environmental spaces themselves must transform to reflect the values and priorities of the communities they aim to serve.

### What belonging actually looks like

Through our work, we discovered that true belonging emerges when voices are not just heard but genuinely valued—when consultation transforms into real influence over programme design, delivery and strategic priorities. In spaces where belonging flourishes, perspectives don't simply receive acknowledgment, they catalyse meaningful change. Young people experience the difference between being asked for input and knowing their insights will reshape the work itself.

Perhaps most significantly, belonging cultivates a deep sense of ownership over environmental spaces. **Rather than feeling like grateful guests invited into pre-existing structures, young people develop the understanding that these spaces are theirs to shape and transform.** This ownership manifests as the confidence to challenge approaches that don't serve their communities and the agency to propose meaningful alternatives.

**Crucially, spaces that foster belonging build upon the existing strengths that young people and their communities bring, rather than expecting communities to conform to established environmental frameworks. They recognise that diversity of approach strengthens rather than threatens environmental work.**

## Activities and methods

This insight project began with a plan to explore how we could reach more communities of young people across the West Midlands, but what has actually evolved is a wider exploration of the role of our programme within the environmental movement. Looking into the ways we and others connect and engage with young people, we have developed our offer to work in more effective collaboration with other organisations. This has seen ELP2 better understand how our work could fit within the complex lives of young people and existing support systems.

### 1. Reimagining and reframing recruitment

Working with RSWT's Equality, Diversity and Inclusion team, we explored what 'belonging' means in environmental contexts and how it can help support more young people to engage with nature and environmental organisations. This work built on the ELP2 team's previous research into barriers to green jobs for young people, developing a more nuanced understanding of how environmental organisations can create genuine spaces of welcome and ownership for young people experiencing emerging adulthood.

### 2. Centring valuable experiences for young people

Instead of asking organisations across the West Midlands to simply buy into the ELP2 programme and share our information, we developed the "Green Pathways" workshop, offering genuine content that addressed barriers young people face when thinking about and working towards careers in the green sector. These workshops were developed to be delivered in spaces where participants already felt safe and supported, creating opportunities for honest dialogue about environmental sector barriers.

**The hope was these workshops would be spaces where young people could see into the wider environmental movement, and start to think about what becoming part of that movement might offer them.** Rather than positioning ELP2 as the only option, the approach was to showcase multiple pathways for environmental engagement, with the ELP2 being one option. This shift from formal programme recruitment to starting conversations and movement building also changed the team's understanding of success, recognising the impact of engagement outside of recruitment indicators. The workshops addressed real barriers that our research had identified, including understanding

of terminology such as ‘green jobs’, skills gaps, and addressing representation concerns across the sector.

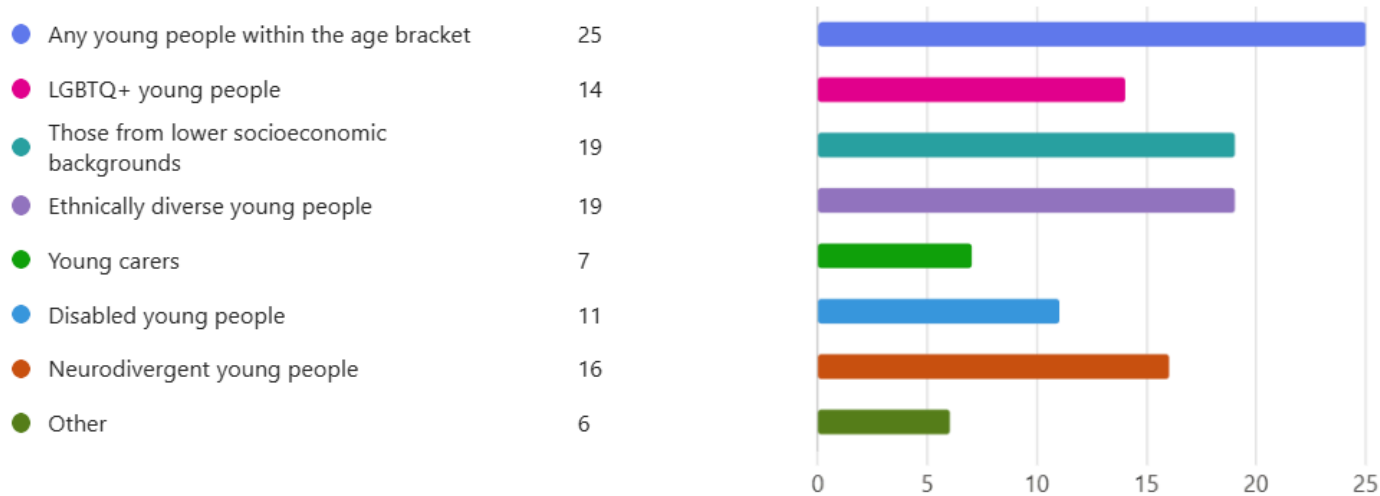
By making these sessions genuinely valuable independent of whether anyone applied to ELP2, organisations could host workshops knowing they were providing concrete benefit to their young people regardless of our own recruitment outcomes.

3. Practitioner research and listening

The team conducted an anonymous online survey with community organisers, youth workers, teachers, and lecturers to better understand how organisations can work together to support young people moving into the environmental movement. The survey focused on their decision-making processes around collaborations, exploring the complex considerations, constraints, and partnership needs that practitioners navigate when deciding what opportunities to share with their communities.

This research allowed us to reach out to new contacts and build relationships with more individuals within organisations we had existing contact with, including across Wildlife Trusts. Through this survey, we were able to gain insights about timing and

The graph below shows results to our survey question: ‘Are there any specific communities of young people your role supports?’

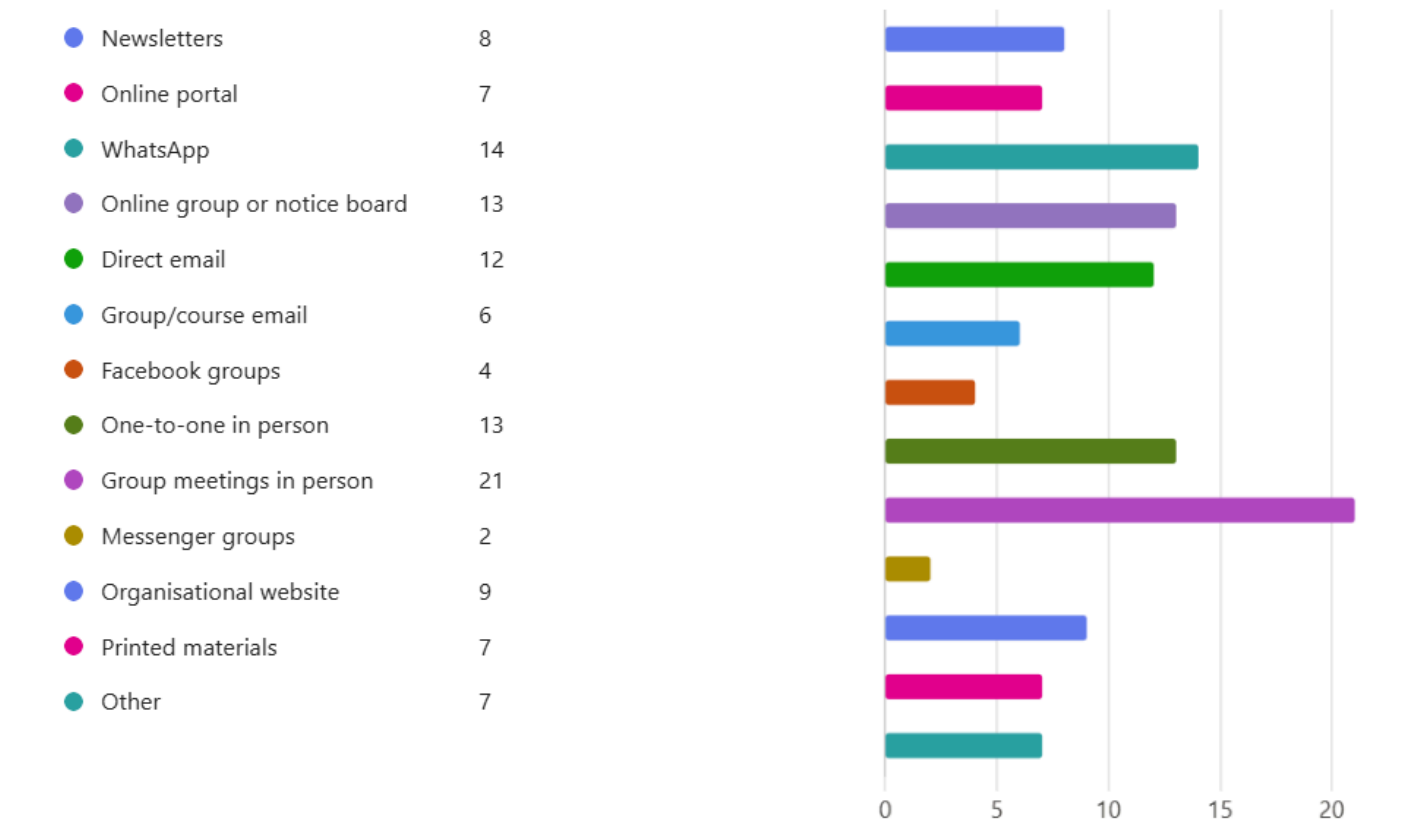


communication preferences, but also, perhaps more significantly, it allowed us to see more clearly the need of a shift towards movement building activities that were more accessible and ‘low risk’ or ‘low investment’ for young people that might consider taking part.

4. Relationship investment and partnership development

We restructured our approach to recruitment timing and relationship building. Starting our recruitment period earlier gave us more time to focus on the strategy behind our recruitment relationships, factoring in partner organisations’ timelines and constraints. This investment approach included giving away resources and materials for free, investing time in one-to-one meetings and check-ins, and tailoring workshops to fit individual organisational needs.

The graph below shows results to our survey question: ‘What do you consider the most effective way to share opportunities with young people in your organisation?’





# Key findings

## Sector insights from the survey with youth organisations

- 1. There was a strong appetite for collaboration** with the survey revealing an openness to partnership, alignment with the ELP2's diversity and inclusion goals, and willingness across sectors to engage in collaborative efforts:
  - 83% of organisations expressed interest in receiving recruitment information.
  - 79% actively consider opportunity sharing as part of their core work, indicating that collaboration is embedded in practitioners' roles.
  - 100% work with diverse groups of young people.
- 2. Despite the challenges, the infrastructure is still there for sharing information with some groups of young people** with some clear communication channels already in place and actively used:
  - Opportunities are shared monthly (41%) or weekly (38%), showing consistent engagement.
  - 79% share opportunities on an ad hoc basis, suggesting that flexible, responsive communication is valued.
  - Established channels included group meetings, direct email, WhatsApp, and online portals.

Whilst our research indicated the above, this needs to be considered in the wider context of many young people becoming disconnected from, or indeed never becoming connected with different youth groups and systems.

- 3. There are some clear barriers that can be addressed in regards to collaborative partnerships,** with most barriers identified being practical:
  - Time constraints were the most significant barrier with 66% of respondents citing them, suggesting a challenge with capacity, not willingness.
  - Organisations seek better-targeted opportunities, with 59% saying information being relevant was sometimes an issue.
  - Building meaningful, trusted relationships was significant, with 31% saying that receiving information from an unfamiliar organisation would be a barrier to sharing opportunities with their young people.
  - Sharing of too much in depth information was another, with 21% of respondents saying information overload was an issue, demonstrating that concise and clear communication is needed.
  - There was a high demand for practical resources, and specific interest in tools that support collaboration, including template communications, short sharable videos and training materials.

# Outcomes so far

The following outputs have been achieved:

## New relationships have been developed including with:

- Birmingham Youth Service
- Cultures in Unity
- Connect Futures
- Social Mobility Foundation
- Chinese Community Centre Birmingham
- Sir Lenny Henry Centre for Media Diversity
- University of Birmingham School of Journalism
- Educational consultants, Etio
- Birmingham Scholars, University of Birmingham
- Hindu Climate Action (a project of the Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies)
- Digital climate education facilitators, BizEd

## Workshops delivered to date:

- Birmingham City University
- Ark Victoria College
- Sandwell College

## In October 2025 the team delivered its first external Share, Learn, Improve cross-sector collaboration event delivered with 22 attendees from:

- Birmingham Settlement
- Birmingham City College
- University of Birmingham
- Act On Energy
- Sandwell College
- Birmingham City Council
- Birmingham Youth Service
- BizEd
- 9 regional Wildlife Trusts

## Insights into movement building

Our exploration into diverse recruitment has revealed that effective movement building requires a fundamental shift from transactional outreach to genuine community partnership. Three interconnected principles have emerged from our findings.

### 1. Understanding and adapting to community contexts

This requires programmes to understand and adapt to community contexts rather than expecting communities to adapt to organisational approaches. This extends beyond logistical considerations such as choosing appropriate venues for workshops or meetings. It demands that we place value on cultural contexts, communication preferences, and existing support networks. While the ELP2 does position its work in spaces where young people already feel safe and supported, such as connecting with community centres, colleges, and youth organisations, the principle requires deeper cultural competency. We must strive to further understand how different communities of young people conceptualise environmental issues, identify what language resonates with their existing values and concerns, and recognise how environmental opportunities fit within their broader life priorities and constraints.

Survey findings revealed that successful engagement requires understanding educational and youth work calendars. Organisations operate within complex rhythms of busy periods, planning cycles, and capacity constraints - where possible working with these will strengthen collaboration.

### 2. Making offers relevant and valuable

Traditional recruitment approaches often ask communities to recognise value in what programmes are already offering. Effective movement building inverts this assumption entirely, requiring programmes to adapt our offer to create genuine value for the communities we seek to engage. The Green Pathways workshops directly address the practical obstacles young people face, tackling real barriers rather than assumed ones. By ensuring workshops provide genuine value independent of whether participants go on to apply for the ELP2, workshops enable communities to host sessions knowing they are delivering concrete benefits to their young people regardless of recruitment outcomes.

### 3. Developing authentic partnerships

Shifting from asking organisations to help programme recruitment, to exploring how projects can support wider sector goals and youth development is key to this. Meaningful partnerships develop over months rather than weeks, requiring projects to approach recruitment as ongoing relationship building rather than one-off style outreach, and to prioritise collaboration that extends beyond single recruitment cycles. Key to this is genuinely understanding and contributing to partner organisations' work and their role in the sector.

## Measuring movement building

Whilst most of the ELP2's Monitoring, Evaluation and Impact work focuses on programme impact on the individual and nature, thought needs to go into how to understand success differently. **Further development is needed towards measuring the impact of programmes on bringing more diverse young people into the movement in a meaningful and sustained way.**

Similarly with understanding belonging within programmes and cohorts, there is a need to capture feelings and perceptions of young people taking part.

Instead of measuring workshop effectiveness by application numbers, we are moving towards assessing whether participants feel more confident about environmental career possibilities, have clearer understanding of sector pathways, and feel more connected to environmental opportunities generally.

In terms of programme engagements, rather than simply counting diverse participation, we want to assess whether diverse participants feel empowered to influence direction and approach within the environmental movement. We already explore community building indicators across the Environmental Leadership Programme and track whether participants are connecting with each other, building networks that extend beyond our programme, and seeing themselves as part of broader environmental movements. We want to lean into these measures to help us understand whether we're creating isolated individual experiences or fostering collective diverse movement building.



With support from wider teams at the Royal Society of Wildlife Trusts, ELP2 will also be leaning into more qualitative data collection, using a combination of observation and tracking methods, including:

- The Wildlife Trust's Community Action for Nature (CAN) app (see below).
- Offering a wider variety of options through which participants can share their stories and perspectives (such as postcards and conversations).
- More organic listening, observing and storytelling - having a data officer on the ground at sessions to observe in a more journalistic way, capturing meaningful moments and speaking directly with participants about their experiences.

Long-term connection indicators can be used to assess whether people stay connected to environmental communities over time, connect with other young people, and see nature as part of their long-term identity and career path. These measures could help us understand sustainable impact beyond programme completion, reflecting the 'Team Wilder' community organising outcomes - tracking whether we're building collective power for sustained environmental action that continues without ongoing organisational dependency.

### **The 'CAN' app**

This new software developed in 2025 will be used by projects across The Wildlife Trusts to track how closely connected individuals or groups are to nature through observable behaviours.

It measures engagement across a participation scale: looking at nature, joining in activities, taking part with others, and influencing others.

It records connection levels at programme start and monitors changes throughout, creating a longitudinal picture of evolving engagement. It can be used to demonstrate how individuals progress from passive interest to active environmental leadership, capturing the shift from individual engagement to community organising that defines movement building.

It can track both group-level trends and individual journeys using anonymised codes, showing how programmes create pathways into environmental movements with both reach and depth of impact.

## **Questions we carrying forward**

This insight project has brought to the surface several questions that require ongoing attention and development as the ELP2 shifts its approach towards movement building and belonging.

### **1. Scaling challenges**

Fundamental questions emerge about maintaining relationship depth while increasing reach. We must address how to ensure partnership approaches remain authentic and valuable as we work with growing numbers of organisations. This raises important questions about what systems and resources are needed for sustainable partnership management at scale.

### **2. Intersectionality in practice**

Creating belonging that works across multiple identities is something we need to keep exploring. Young people are not simply "diverse", they are young carers, disabled people, LGBTQ+, from working-class backgrounds, recent immigrants, and hold multiple intersecting identities simultaneously. We need to prioritise our work with wider organisations and sectors about how to better understand this and create belonging approaches with this at its heart.

### **3. Sector-wide change**

Individual organisational efforts, while important, cannot address systemic barriers alone. We are considering how we can contribute to broader environmental sector transformation while maintaining focus on our specific community and region. This raises questions about what role belonging-centred approaches can play in wider sectoral change, and how learning from our localised work might inform or challenge established practices across the environmental movement. Creating lasting change requires both depth in our immediate context and strategic contribution to wider sector conversations about access, equity, and movement building.

# Conclusion

This project will underpin how we understand and approach programme delivery moving forwards on the ELP2. By moving away from transactional to partnership approaches with other organisations and sectors, we can develop a more joined up approach to youth development and environmental action. Conscious changes in the 'why' behind the ways deliver the programme will see us move from inclusion, towards true belonging for young participants, with a similar focus shift from organisational needs to community benefit. Through this, we can create more sustainable relationships, more effective pathways into environmental leadership, and ultimately have a more positive and sustained impact on the lives of young people and the planet.

Our work demonstrates that diverse recruitment isn't primarily a marketing or outreach challenge - it's a relationship challenge that requires genuine value creation, authentic partnership, and long-term commitment. The environmental challenges we face require diverse perspectives, experiences, and solutions that can only emerge when people feel genuine ownership and belonging in environmental movements. The shift from inclusion to belonging requires adopting community organising principles exemplified by the Trusts' 'Team Wilder' approach that build reciprocal relationships, start with community priorities, and create collective power for environmental action that outlasts individual interventions. Creating this belonging takes longer than traditional recruitment, requires deeper relationships, and demands that we examine our own assumptions and power structures. But it can create more sustainable change for individuals, organisations, and environmental movements as a whole.

This learning journey continues, imperfect and ongoing, offered in the spirit of collective improvement and environmental transformation.

**This project report represents learning from the Environmental Leadership Programme 2, a Community Action Fund project led by The Wildlife Trusts. We're grateful to all partner organisations, survey respondents, and especially the participants and programme alumni who have fed into this work.**



Graphic: NPC's Everyone's Environment visual summary

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