

Tees Valley Wildlife Trust

A person centred workforce for people who have autism

Tees Valley Wildlife Trust (TVWT) have been researching and delivering projects that connect local communities with green spaces to improve health and well-being since 2006.

We have found people who volunteer on our nature reserves gain unique skills vital for employment. As well as traditional transferable skills such as communication and problem solving skills, volunteers can gain other unique skills from tasks such as bush craft, dry stone walling and grass-cutting.

These experiences have significant physical health impacts linked to exercise outdoors. Interestingly they have also been shown to increase confidence, self-esteem, independence, self-management of conditions, social skills and organisation.

All these factors naturally contribute to a person's employability, particularly when combined with practical experience, skills and knowledge gained through volunteering. We have also found where many people face barriers to employment and/or education, these are often overcome through our inclusive approach to volunteering – where everyone can find something worthwhile to do in nature that can be valuable to them and others.

TVWT also underpin all their volunteering and educational opportunities with an individual approach, using journals and an awards scheme to recognise and respond to individuals' needs, motives, experiences and achievements.

After working with a few volunteers who have learning difficulties and specifically those with Autism and Asperger syndrome, the Trust linked up with a local specialist school in Middlesbrough and developed a programme of activities designed to benefit 16-19 year olds with Autism, who were soon to move on to further education or employment.

What we wanted to achieve

The main aim of the project was to deliver and evaluate a programme of nature-based activities to improve the employability of young adults with Autism, contributing to their health and well-being and that of Tees Valley communities.

The 'Life Skills' programme was piloted with the support of Skills for Care to respond to four main needs for services which;

- Help young people overcome personal barriers that may prevent them from entering the workplace, training or further education
- Help young people boost their CV's and experience in the increasingly competitive jobs market by giving them hands-on experience and professional, transferable skills

- Increase the skills and knowledge of TVWT staff around working with people with learning disabilities
- Give young people the opportunity to take on greater responsibility in their own learning, communities, environments and health.

What we did

The project idea:

The idea for this project emerged from feedback from existing volunteers, partner organisations and local residents, but our programme needed to be tailored to the needs of the sixth form students. Discussions with Beverley School lead to the design of a ten-week programme of activities, with students volunteering one day a week. It was designed to fit in with the current curriculum, the needs of local employers, the needs and skills of the students and the local environment.

The volunteering sessions:

To start all students were asked to begin a journal, identifying their existing skills, their goals and to complete a survey on nature and well-being. Each student was also given a disposable camera to record their journey throughout the programme.

Five volunteering sessions were organised on two of our urban nature reserves. These sessions involved creating nesting habitats for breeding birds, cutting back trees and making natural fences. One volunteering session also enabled students to volunteer on some local farmland, helping to repair walls and surveying different species living on the North Yorkshire moors, gaining experience managing a different form of land.

Another five sessions were delivered with a focus on particular skills including dry stone walling, green woodwork, blacksmithing and bush craft. These workshops meant that the students had objects they had made to take away with them representing their achievements.

After each session, students were asked to reflect on their experience and write this in their journal. All 13 participants (and four teachers) took part in all sessions but also had choices within these about certain tasks and group roles,

tool duties etc. All the sessions also contributed towards TVWT volunteering certificates and also the John Muir Discovery Award which recognises conservation and awareness of wild places.

Staff development at TVWT:

TVWT recognised that there was a clear need to increase the skills of staff involved in this project with the view that it would be delivered again in the future. There was already a considerable amount of experience within the team delivering this project both personally and professionally, but few formal qualifications. The Skills for Care support enabled one staff member to begin a NCFE Level 2 Certificate in Principles of Working with Individuals with Learning Disabilities.

Evaluation:

At the end of the programme TVWT staff and Beverley School students completed a second survey on nature and well-being, reviewed their progress and photographs, choosing images that best portrayed their experiences and feelings about the project. Awards and a collection of photographs were presented to each student during sixth form assembly.

What we achieved

The project's main outcome was providing 13 young adults from Beverley School with practical work experience in a number of areas connected to the natural environment.

This involved several tangible outputs for the students, for TVWT and the local community:

- All students received the silver award for volunteering from TVWT
- All students received the John Muir Discovery award for conservation
- All students received photographs and a journal as a portfolio of their work
- All students were able to create something unique, either from woodwork, metalwork or other crafts, to take home with them
- Our nature and well-being survey showed that the majority of students reported an increase in

confidence, social skills, fitness and connection to nature

- Students who were not engaging well in other learning activities attended all sessions of this programme
- Students felt proud that their ideas and input were used in the project and volunteer tasks
- Portrack Marsh nature reserve now has an improved area for breeding birds
- Margrove Heritage Centre now has an extended section of dry stone wall
- Woodhill Meadow reserve now has an improved outdoor space for educational workshops (students relined our ‘African hut’ with clay from the reserve)
- Several wildlife surveys were conducted and walls repaired at a farm in Castleton

Due to the nature of the project there were many personal and individual achievements for everyone involved. The following comments from students and teachers from Beverley School demonstrate the range of these:

I've realised I can work quite well with others and I'm good at organising things where there is quite a lot going on at once, those are things I'm sure any employer would want to hear about.

Participant of the programme

Our involvement in this project has provided unique learning experiences and opportunities to promote confidence and well-being. For one student whose attendance at school has been poor it has proven motivational and has led to a marked increase in their attendance.

Teacher

I have enjoyed this so much; it's really shown me that we can do other things than just indoor work and that we have lots of options. I never thought anyone would trust me to do some of the things I've learned here!

Participant of the programme

What we learnt

We can help more people than we thought we could – originally we had offered the programme to 10 students but 13 took part and completed.

The programme must remain flexible so that there are not only plenty of choices for individuals but so that we can respond to changing and often complex needs.

That this is certainly a viable programme that not only appeals to young adults who may face barriers related to health and well-being, but it also works on various levels and is extremely efficient at providing this service.

Our staff have many hidden talents that we need to make the most of!



For more information please contact

Jenny Hagan, Development Officer
jhagan@teeswildlife.org
www.teeswildlife.org

Skills for Care Recommends

Skills for Care has helped to develop a range of resources that directly help employers and those caring for people with autism.

Autism skills and knowledge list

This enables individual workers, or services and teams, to work out whether they have the knowledge and skills needed to provide a good service to people who have autism.

[www.skillsforcare.org.uk/
Autism](http://www.skillsforcare.org.uk/Autism)

Autism qualifications

Two new autism qualifications were launched in September 2014. These are a Level 3 Award and a Level 3 Certificate in Supporting Individuals on the Autistic Spectrum.

[www.skillsforcare.org.uk/
Autism](http://www.skillsforcare.org.uk/Autism)

Workforce Development Fund

Funding is available for employers to claim back costs for the learning and development of their staff, including Autism units and qualifications.

www.skillsforcare.org.uk/wdf

Skills for Care
West Gate
6 Grace Street
Leeds
LS1 2RP
telephone 0113 245 1716
email info@skillsforcare.org.uk
web www.skillsforcare.org.uk

@skillsforcare 
www.facebook.com/skillsforcare 
www.youtube.com/skillsforcare 
www.linkedin.com/company/skills-for-care 

