

Leicester Young Ecology Adventurers Evaluation Report 1: Pilot



Executive Summary

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1. Executive Summary

This report presents the findings of external evaluation of the Pilot Phase of Leicester Young Ecology Adventurers. Data was collected using a mix of methods centred on gathering young people's perspectives on project impacts and stakeholder feedback on delivery.

Headlines:

- Young participants and the project partners regard the pilot as a success.
- Good progress was made in achievements related to each headline outcome.
- The pilot demonstrates the potential of the programme model, and allowed learning about how delivery can be enhanced.
- This provides a good basis for subsequent stages, during which outstanding elements of impact can be evaluated.

The pilot programme was successful with **positive feedback** from participants, and all partners satisfied with delivery. Good progress has been made across all key outcomes which were tracked by evaluation activity. Although challenges and problems were encountered, many of these were addressed in the course of the programme to ensure that a full set of activities were delivered. Perhaps the most significant sign of success is that **all young people who signed up completed the full programme**. Feedback suggests participants were broadly satisfied with the nature of the programme, with a majority reporting they had benefited in various ways. Each session was delivered safely and in a coordinated manner. As might be expected for a pilot stage, the partners identified changes they would like to make in future.

Programme achievements:

- 18 young people, completed 40 hours of activities over 12 weeks
- 5 volunteers attended 10 sessions equalling around 45 hours of volunteering
- 18 young people achieved John Muir Award
- 3 volunteers received certificates from Canal and River Trust.
- 10 young people met with Canal & River Trust staff to talk about their experiences
- Around 30 people attended Graduation Event.
- 2 young people discussed their experiences on local radio.

The data illustrates good progress made across the outcome areas:

BENEFICIARY	OUTCOME ASSESSMENT Green = Achieved Amber = Partially Achieved Red = Not achieved White = No data collected	Justification
Leicester's natural heritage	1) Headline outcome: Greater understanding of waterway natural heritage	
	a) waterway wildlife will be observed, interpreted and explained through the eyes of young participants	Young people participated in various wildlife observation activities and demonstrate learning about wildlife, and delivered some interpretation of this
	b) interpretation will be communicated to friends, families, teachers and others	Some interpretation communicated at presentation events but in limited detail and to a relatively small audience
	c) natural heritage communicated to a wider audience through media activity	Press and social media activity had limited reach, communication was about the project more generally and included little detail on natural heritage
Young participants	2) Headline outcome: Local waterways are more significant to young people's lives	
	a) increased understanding of waterways' historic context	Majority of young people demonstrate significant increase from almost no awareness to at least some understanding
	b) increased understanding and appreciation of the unique natural heritage of Leicester's waterways	All young people demonstrate significant increase from almost no awareness to at least some understanding, with some highlighting this as a favourite aspect of the project
	c) increased interest in History, Science and Geography at school	A minority of young people expressed greater interest in these subjects.
d) enhanced personal and social skills (e.g. perseverance, overcoming challenge, team work)	Majority of young people report these gains, with many highlighting them as a key project benefits	

	e) enhanced practical skills (e.g. canoeing, digital communication skills)	All young people reported skills gains with a majority highlighting them as main project outcomes
	f) sense of pride, enjoyment and achievement	Young people reported personal achievement, a sense of pride in their own accomplishment, and that often they had fun. Some found the project challenging and at times uncomfortable, although many highlighted that they overcame this.
Wider community	3) Headline outcome: Local residents are more aware of the significance of waterways	
	a) increased awareness of the city's natural heritage and its value	No data collected
	b) increased awareness of young people's achievements and activities	Relatively small audience of local people were informed about the project with awareness focused on young participants' families
	c) increased awareness of canals and waterways as places of recreation and heritage	No data collected
	d) local people are offered enriching volunteering experiences	No data collected

Outcomes for Young People

- Overall **most young people enjoyed the project**, highlighting the novelty of the activities to them and the opportunities to learn new things.
- There was some **ambivalence and uncertainty** about recommending the project to others, and their **peers' future interest** in visiting waterways, despite most having enjoyed it and valued their own experience.
- **Canoeing** represented the most **enjoyable** aspect of the project, it was also one of the most **difficult** for some young people. Others found being in the environment uncomfortable.
- **The very low baseline that the group started from in relation to waterways and being around water means that achievements in this area are particularly significant.**
- The young people identified **social and personal skills**, such as respect, meeting new people, building confidence and teamwork as their primary outcome, which was unexpected.
- They identified learning the skills of **canoeing** as of high importance, and as the most enjoyable of the activities. **Learning about wildlife and waterways** did feature, but less significantly.

- However, some aspects of the activities regarded as fun by some were seen as the '**worst things**' by others, such as **splashing**, getting wet and cold.
- There may be a **gap** in terms of what is assessed as part of the **project outcomes** and what the **young people regarded as more significant**.
- Young people **gained awareness** of waterways, their functions, and heritage features. Most were starting from a **very low baseline** of waterway knowledge and awareness and demonstrated considerable gains in understanding.
- There was a **positive change** in young people's self-assessment of their knowledge, but many felt unsure about their knowledge compared to their peers, perhaps suggesting a low self-image of themselves as knowledgeable compared to peers
- **Wildlife features are more prominent** than historic features in young people's understanding of and interest in waterway heritage.
- Young people placed particular emphasis on the **practical skills** they had learnt during the project, particularly the actions associated with controlling the canoe.
- **Teamwork skills and sociability** with other young people and adults were important learning outcomes of the project for the young people.
- **Tensions** remained between some of the young people, particularly between boys and girls, when working together.
- Young people **overcame their fears** and gained confidence in unfamiliar environments and activities, but ideas about activities being 'dangerous' remained for some.
- How young people felt about waterways and activities on them was important – there was a **spectrum of feelings**: calming, exciting, whilst for some it was dirty and boring.
- Different feelings about **how waterways could be enjoyed** (as calm and active, exciting places) could be incorporated into future iterations of the project.
- **Non-core project activities** were important for young people. Some enjoyed the 'documenting' activities as part of the evaluation, others enjoyed opportunities to 'play' rather than doing pre-determined tasks.
- The project had **little immediate impact** on the young people's subject choices at School. However, some young people believed that the project **would help them with their work at School**, particularly Geography.
- **Other ways to measure and record** the immediate and possibly lasting impacts on young people's educational careers **might be considered for future project groups**.

Outcomes for Partners

- All partners agreed **the programme was successful**. They agreed the achievements of the young people and the community, although with slightly different emphases.
- Outcomes for the **community and parents** were apparent at this early stage, but more data will be recorded as the project proceeds.
- Overcoming **parental fears** and concerns was a significant achievement of the project perhaps not foreseen during planning.
- Those with **direct contact** with the participating young people (parents and families) were **most clearly impacted**. Parents typically focused on the benefits for their children, rather than to themselves and the community.
- The project **gained some publicity** in local media and on social media, although data is limited at present.
- **Volunteers** were mostly parents of participants, and impacts focused on allaying parental fears through volunteer presence.

- The **Graduation** event was significant for **impacting immediate families**, but more might be done to engage the wider community and attract publicity.

Success Factors

- The **time taken to plan and discuss the programme** between partners was lengthy but appropriate, given that the detailed project plan ensured the success of the pilot phase.
- Project **partners** each had **clear roles** suited to their capacity and expertise, with each providing **essential complementary** elements.
- A **key coordinating person** who linked the core partners was crucial for project planning and the ongoing adjustments in response to challenges. This was particularly important for SOCOPA.
- The **John Muir Award acted as a binding framework** for the project, giving greater kudos to the programme, and a purpose to the interlinked activities. The challenge remains for the young people to also recognise this.
- Project **flexibility** and the **reflexive approach** of the coordinating staff was important for making changes mid-way through.
- The **variety of enjoyable activities** was recognised as keeping young people interested and involved in the project, offering a balance between education, learning and fun.
- **Young people had minimal input** to the project design – an area to consider developing in future.
- **Reassuring parents early on** was successful in ensuring their trust in the project and the staff. This should be built in as a key stage in the project.

Challenges

The main challenges agreed by the project partners were:

- managing **behaviour** of the young people, including providing clarity about **who is responsible** for this, and developing different **pre-emptive strategies**;
- managing the **group size** so it is appropriate for the activity, and addressing the **ratios of staff to young people** to ensure that activities can be managed effectively;
- lack of **youth work support** during sessions to assist with behaviour and group management;
- allowing enough time early in the project for the young people to develop **sufficient canoeing skills** so that they can complete later activities;
- **timing** of particular activities and the number of activities taking place in a single session **being over-ambitious**; and
- young people's **reflective learning** not being fully incorporated into sessions with implications for engagement with the **John Muir Award**.

Recommended Changes

Programme and sessions:

- **Initial sessions to focus on water and canoe skills**, and sufficient to allow competence before other activities are combined with canoeing.
- **Refine design of activities** based on learning what worked well, what young people were interested in.
- Seek to **maintain a variety** of activities and locations.
- **Revise session timings** to suit what is feasible in terms of speed of moving the group around, and keeping to a **maximum of 1hr 15min** on the water.

- Reschedule **more complex activities** (e.g. wildlife transect) for **later in the programme**.
- Aim to start and finish **earlier** so young people do not get so tired and it is easier for their families.
- Find a better way to incorporate **reflective activity** for the Award.

Group size:

- Total group size to be a **maximum of 14** to enable learning, and better engagement with staff and tasks.
- **Break into smaller groups** for completing activities to enable closer supervision, easier communication, and ease behaviour management.

Staffing:

- Aim for an **instructor-young people ration of 1:8** to allow them to promote learning effectively.
- Include **specialist youth workers** for each session.
- Ensure **adults on the water are briefed** beforehand on water safety and canoe skills.
- Seek **funds for CRT to employ a suitable staff member** to deliver their responsibilities, and **reduce reliance on volunteers**.

The Evaluation

Strengths:

- The young people had a **strong voice** in the evaluation, with multiple forms of expression allowing their thoughts, feelings and opinions. This led to the identification of **important outcomes for young people** that had not previously been identified as core to the project. These could be **incorporated in evaluation** activity in future.
- A **broad range of qualitative data gathering techniques** allowed the evaluation team to 'get at' different aspects of the project that were important for the young people and project partners.
- Some of the evaluation activities **were enjoyable for the young people**, including creating their own films, and doing creative reflective exercises.
- Some of the evaluation exercises **encouraged the young people to reflect on their learning**.

Limitations and Recommendations:

- The young people largely commented on and recollected wildlife and environment in their responses to the evaluation methods, with fewer discussing the heritage elements of waterways. More could be done to **measure their learning about waterway heritage**.
- To date, only very limited observational data has been collected on **volunteers**, and no data has been collected on the **wider community** apart from those directly connected to the young people themselves. These should be priorities in future.
- More in-depth data is needed from the young people's **parents**, relating to the impacts on the young people themselves, their families, and the wider community.
- For all of the above groups, data is needed on their understandings of **wildlife and heritage of canals** to assess with wider communities understanding of these aspects of local waterways and the possible impacts the project may be having beyond young people.
- Use of **school subject choices** appeared to be a poor measure of the longer-term impacts on young people and the more immediate impacts on their learning in school. Different measures or techniques should be considered for assessing this.

- The **John Muir Award Diaries** offer considerable potential to collect data from young people about their experiences of the project, particularly given their close connection with achieving the award, and as a good exercise for young people to reflect on their learning. It should be considered how they might be better integrated into the programme.
- The young people were most likely **over-evaluated** during the pilot, with several whole sessions devoted to reflective and evaluative exercises. For some young people, these compared poorly with the exciting water-based sessions. Some evaluation could be better integrated into others activities in shorter timeframes, for example through use of the diaries.
- The **in-depth interviews** with young people were particularly useful for assessing their past experience of green and blue spaces, outdoor activities, sports and ideas about nature, wildlife and heritage. Only two pilot interviews have been conducted so far, but more would allow a deeper assessment of the likely impacts of the project.