

Impact report: Rural Skills Outreach

June 2024



Students from The Cotswold School learning how to build a dry-stone wall © Jonty Brunyee

Background

Cotswolds National Landscape has a long track record of working with schools and youth providers. Historically, delivery was through our rural skills programme and/or the Cotswold Voluntary Wardens. We have also worked with partners such as Young Gloucestershire and Princes Trust; a pilot project in 2018 for young people to learn rural skills was particularly successful. Whilst this work was high quality and well received, it wasn't part of a structured programme so we were unable to offer continuity. This changed in summer 2021 when we secured external funding from several sources to expand our offer of outdoor learning sessions. The funders for this work are acknowledged here:

Thames Water Community Fund	£24,200
Wates Foundation	£7,000
Gloucestershire County Council: HAF	£3,400
Summerfield Trust	£3,000
Renishaw Charities Committee	£500
Total	£38,100

How many people have we reached?

We began delivering sessions in autumn 2021, and since then we have worked with primary and secondary aged school children, and young adults. For primary aged children, the sessions were modelled on a forest school style. In this age group we occasionally ran outdoor learning sessions for a full class of 30 but typically the group size was much smaller.

For secondary aged children, the sessions were focused on experiencing and gaining rural skills. Group sizes ranged from 5-10, which enabled the session leaders to spend lots of time teaching. Smaller groups also benefited the young adults we worked with. For these groups we suggested a minimum of three sessions to embed learning, and this was very effective.

The numbers of children/ young people we've reached on this project is summarised below.

	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24
Number of work experience placements	5	0	4
Number of sessions delivered	18	24	45
Childrens (4-15) session places delivered	159	218	254
Young peoples (16-25) session places delivered	44	40	3
Total children and young people	203	258	257
Number of events attended	1	2	1
Number of families engaged with activities at events	120	175	20

Where did the work take place?

Some of the funders had restrictions on where the work could take place but as there were multiple funders, we were able to offer sessions across a broad area of the Cotswolds. Our core area throughout the project was on the eastern side of the Cotswolds. In some cases, we were able to deliver sessions on the site where the organisation was based. For example, at Burford School the new forest school was held on the school grounds. In others cases, we delivered sessions off-site. For example, the students at The Cotswold School visited lots of different farms across the Cotswolds as part of their learning programme.

In the eastern side of the Cotswolds, we worked with:

- The Cotswold School, Bourton-on-the-Water. For two academic years we delivered a bespoke rural skills training programme for a group of Year 9 students. We also provided work experience placements to multiple students.
- The Churn Project, a Cirencester-based charity supporting vulnerable and marginalised people. We provided outdoor learning sessions for young people.
- Into Nature, a CIC with a focus on nature connection. Together, we ran sessions for the residents of the Beeches area of Cirencester.
- The Royal Agricultural University, Cirencester. We provided 30-day work experience placements for undergraduate students.
- Burford School, Burford. New for 2023, we set up a Forest School for students to attend after school every Monday in the spring/ summer terms.
- FarmED, a not-for-profit organisation based at Honeydale Farm, Shipton-under-Wychwood. We provided financial support to enable young people to attend the Emergent Generation Conference.

In the west we were particularly keen to make new connections with schools and groups from Gloucester, Cheltenham and Stroud. We were successful in this respect and delivered some fantastic sessions for these groups. However, the funds for delivery on the western side of the Cotswolds only lasted about a year. In the western side of the Cotswolds, we worked with:

- Naunton Park Primary School, Cheltenham. We delivered two sessions for KS1 classes on Leckhampton Hill and two at Greystones Farm, Bourton-on-the-Water.
- Thomas Keble School, Stroud. We delivered multiple woodland management sessions at Sladebank Woods for a group of Year 9 students.
- Gloucestershire Community Rail Partnership. Together we delivered sessions for students at Al Ashraf school, Gloucester and for young people from the Friendship Café and Music Works, also in Gloucester.
- Chipping Campden School. Work experience placement for a Year 12 student.
- Pate's Grammar School, Cheltenham. Work experience placement for a Year 11 student.



Pond dipping at Burford School, as part of a newly formed Forest School ©Tea Smart

What were the benefits?

The level of engagement has varied between groups but we typically try and offer multiple sessions to embed learning. There is almost certainly a positive correlation between the number of sessions a child has attended, and what they learn and how they ultimately benefit from it. That said, one-off sessions can be hugely rewarding and a catalyst for further engagement. Our approach was to co-design bespoke programmes for each school or group we worked with to suit the needs of the children/ young people. We have a menu of activities we can offer but aren't overly prescriptive. This has appealed to the schools we've worked with and they report very positive outcomes. Specifically, they note that the children involved have improved attendance, concentration, improved social and emotional mental health and in turn this is improving their academic progress in their classes.

Students from The Cotswold School have benefited from a particularly comprehensive learning programme; eight full day sessions over two terms. The programme was tailored to the students; they were from farming backgrounds and had expressed an interest in working in the sector. The sessions were deliberately held at a range of farms to give the students exposure to different types of farms and ways of farming. The students tried their hand at a range of rural skills; dry stone walling, coppicing and hedge laying. One session was devoted to tractor training at Guiting Manor Farm. As well as practical skills, we tried to build the students' confidence in their own abilities and self-worth.

As part of the project, we offered work experience placements to students from local schools. The placements, usually taking place over a week, were hugely beneficial for the young people. They provided an insight into the conservation sector and time was spent with different teams within the organisation. The Royal Agricultural University (RAU) placements were particularly long (30 days) and an essential requirement for the students to graduate into their next year of study. We provided a package of practical and conservation-focused experiences, as well as wider management skills, across the different project areas that comprise the Cotswolds National Landscape. One of the RAU students went on to secure paid employment with us.

Promotion/Communications

We were thrilled that the project featured in the January 2023 issue of Cotswold Life; the regional lifestyle magazine. This was especially satisfying because it included interviews with, and photos of, The Cotswold School students, who were given the opportunity to talk about their achievements first hand. A similar article was published in the Cotswold Lion in July 2023, although this article focused on the charities we partnered with and their insights into the benefits of the project. Finally, we have produced a short video showcasing the projects, its participants and trainers.



Tractor training with The Cotswold School students and chainsaw training with RAU student © James Webb