

Natural Leaders Programme

Year 1 Review



February 2024

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"This is brilliant – I'd like to see it in every primary school".

— Senior Community Education Worker



"We could fill the programme for next year three times over".

— Primary School Head Teacher

With thanks to our funders:



With thanks to our partners:





Executive Summary

Natural Leaders is a two-year action research project that is being piloted in three areas of multiple deprivation in North Lanarkshire, Perth and Kinross, and West Lothian. The programme is a partnership between YouthLink Scotland, local authority youth work teams, RSPB and the John Muir Trust, and also involves local natural heritage partners in each setting.

Following the Covid-19 pandemic, it's clear that many of Scotland's most vulnerable young people are still struggling with the return to formal education and are facing multiple barriers to learning engagement and school attendance in both primary and secondary school.

Youth workers are particularly skilled in engaging and supporting the hardest to reach young people – those most severely affected by poverty and wider inequalities. Natural heritage organisations bring a wealth of local knowledge and expertise about wildlife, biodiversity and the environment. The Natural Leaders programme brings these two very different sets of expertise together to create unique learning experiences for young people who are struggling to engage in the school classroom.

Over the last 12 months, 48 young people aged 11-12, identified as being at risk of disengaging from education as they transition from primary school to secondary school have participated in the programme.

This year, the programme has successfully engaged 80% of participating young people, with 39 of the 48 achieving youth awards as a result of their involvement. Early evidence gathered suggests that, through their involvement in the Natural Leaders programme, young people are building new relationships with peers and trusted adults that support their learning and are growing in confidence to:

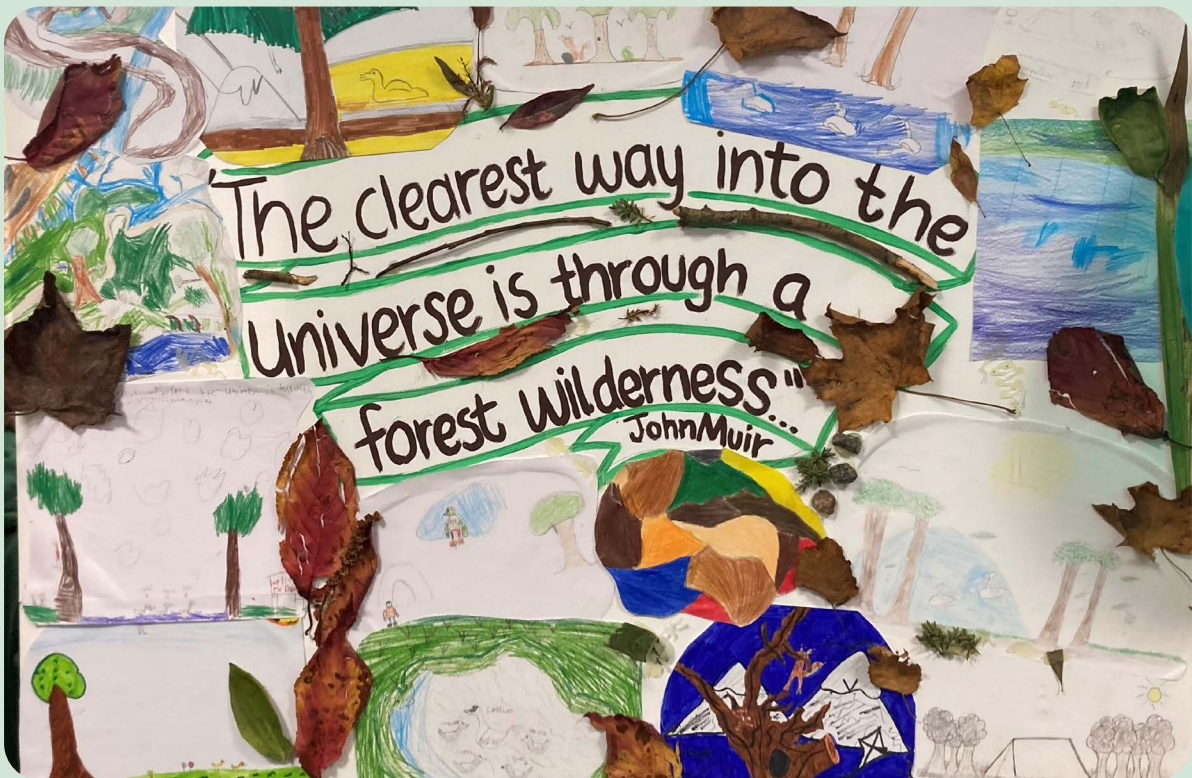
- **Participate in new learning opportunities and experiences.**
- **Communicate more effectively.**
- **Plan and organise activities, in particular showing determination to achieve goals.**
- **Be resilient.**
- **Influence change.**



Young people tell us they have valued the opportunity to learn away from the classroom, with more freedom. Some have noticed that the opportunity to participate in Natural Leaders has made a positive difference to their health and wellbeing and how they feel about learning in school.

Feedback from schools affirms that the programme has had a positive impact on young people's confidence, skills and learning engagement.

Over the coming year, youth workers and natural heritage partners will continue to gather and respond to insights from their reciprocal learning, co-designing resources and a blueprint for the approach that they hope may have much wider application beyond the pilot programme.



St Timothy's Coatbridge Natural Leaders entry to the John Muir Trust's 'Creative Freedom Campaign'



What is the Natural Leaders Programme?

Natural Leaders is a two-year action research project that is being piloted in three areas of multiple deprivation in North Lanarkshire, Perth and Kinross, and West Lothian. Through the programme, more than 100 young people, identified as being at risk of disengaging from formal education will have access to an approach to Learning for Sustainability that aims first to spark young people's connection to nature, before enabling them to create and implement their own plan of action to protect natural heritage in their chosen local greenspace.



The programme is a partnership between YouthLink Scotland, local authority youth work teams, RSPB and the John Muir Trust, and also involves local natural heritage partners in each setting.

The work is funded by the National Lottery Heritage Fund, The David Doig Foundation (via Foundation Scotland) and The Gannochy Trust.

What is the need for an approach like the Natural Leaders Programme?

- Professor Ken Muir's recommendations for education reform in Scotland ('Putting Learners at the Centre – Towards a Vision for Scottish Education', 2023) reinforces the need for 'values, attitudes, knowledge and skills to be significantly strengthened [across the education system] in the context of Learning for Sustainability'.
- We know that young people affected by poverty have fewer opportunities to learn outside and connect with nature and there is growing evidence of the positive impact of outdoor learning on young people's health and wellbeing and attainment.
- Whilst many young people are concerned about conservation, sustainability and climate change, data from the most recent OECD PISA report on Global Competence ('the ability to examine global issues, appreciate different perspectives and take action for collective wellbeing and sustainable development') shows that young people in Scotland scored significantly lower than many other countries in terms of their sense of personal agency to influence these issues (self-efficacy).



- Following the Covid-19 pandemic, it's clear that many of Scotland's most vulnerable young people are still struggling with the return to formal education and are facing multiple barriers to learning engagement and school attendance in both primary and secondary school. Youth workers are particularly skilled in engaging and supporting the hardest to reach – those most severely affected by poverty and wider inequalities. They are working closely with these young people and their families to enable them to overcome barriers to learning. That means engaging with young people in community settings as well as in school, supporting them as they rebuild their confidence and motivation to learn.
- Scotland's Learning for Sustainability Action Plan highlights the need for:
 - » Professional learning that is better at building confidence and capacity.
 - » A focus on "Learning for Sustainability in practice" rather than the theory.

As well as the support that is offered directly to young people through the Natural Leaders project, we have an additional aim of building the confidence and capacity of youth work and school partnerships to collaborate with the environment sector to offer high-quality, inclusive, experiential learning experiences that raise awareness of the importance of natural heritage. A 2020 Scottish Government report highlighted the need to build 'learning communities' that grow confidence to recognise and maximise the potential of Learning for Sustainability to contribute to educational outcomes. The approach that is being developed through the Natural Leaders programme is strengthening local learning networks to support the development of young people in a range of different ways:

- » Building youth workers' skills and confidence to co-design engaging learning experiences with natural heritage partners.
- » Building the skills and confidence of natural heritage partners to engage young people using a genuinely youth-led youth work approach that starts from where young people are.
- » Most importantly, enabling young people to inform new approaches to youth participation in natural heritage.



Natural Leaders Logo
Designed by Charlie
McKeirnan, Primary 7
from St Timothy's Primary
School, Coatbridge,
North Lanarkshire





Programme Design in Year 1

Over the last 12 months, 48 young people aged 11-12, identified as being at risk of disengaging from education have participated in a programme with the following common elements:

Stage 1: Connect with local natural heritage

Working with national and local partners, youth workers supported young people to investigate a local greenspace, learning more about wildlife and biodiversity and exploring natural heritage themes through a range of 'hands on' experiences, designed locally with heritage partners to make the most of local assets. By the end of stage 1, the aim was to have a cohesive group of engaged young people who felt more connected to nature, and a particular local green space.

Stage 2: Plan for action in support of natural heritage

Following these early experiences, youth workers worked collaboratively with the RSPB's education team to identify where and how they wanted to work together to protect the natural heritage in their greenspace. Each group made their own decision about what they wanted to achieve. What was important was that they all felt a genuine sense of ownership for the work they chose to do to make a tangible difference to natural heritage in their local area (see below).

Dedridge Primary School, Livingston

Focus for young people's action plan: park clean-up and working towards reintroducing frogs to Froggie pond by building a hibernaculum.

St Timothy's Primary School, Coatbridge

Focus for young people's action plan: Building bug hotels in Drumpellier Park and a letter-writing campaign to local counsellors regarding litter in the park and dangers to animals.

Rattray and Coupar Angus Primary Schools

Focus for young people's action plan: Building bird boxes and the foundations for a new pond to attract and protect amphibians.

Stage 3: Take a lead in promoting and protecting natural heritage

In this stage, young people worked together to make their ideas a reality. All chose to build habitats for different species as a way of improving biodiversity in their green spaces. In West Lothian and North Lanarkshire, they are also taking opportunities to spread the word about what they are learning to a wider group of community stakeholders.





Promising Indicators of Impact

Engagement in Learning

Early evidence gathered in this first year of the pilot suggests participating young people are building confidence, resilience and communication skills, as well as strong connections with peers and youth workers that they will carry through their transition into secondary school.

Additionally, feedback gathered from young people, schools and some parents to date indicates that young people's experience on the Natural Leaders programme is also having a positive impact on learning engagement in school.

Importantly, youth workers are also valuing the opportunity to establish relationships with young people at this crucial transition in their education. They feel confident that these connections will ensure that some of the young people who are most in need of support will continue to access community-based learning opportunities, alongside those offered in school.

So far, 39 of the 48 young people who participated in the programme this year have achieved youth and environmental awards:

- 20 young people in North Lanarkshire have achieved John Muir Award (Discovery Level) and their Hi5 Awards (level 2).
- 12 young people in West Lothian achieved Youth Achievement Awards.
- 7 young people in Perth and Kinross gained Hi5 Awards.

Almost all of the young people who have taken part in the evaluation of the programme so far say they have built positive new relationships with peers and trusted adults. Many of them also tell us that they grew in confidence to:

- Participate in new learning opportunities and experiences.
- Communicate more effectively in particular speaking in groups, sharing opinions and feeling able to ask for help when they need it.
- Plan and organise activities, in particular showing determination to achieve goals.
- Be resilient – being willing to give things another go and keeping going when things get difficult.
- Influence change, in particular, coming up with ideas, following through on actions in their communities and sharing learning with others.



"I got confident to do new activities – it helped us get to know each other before high school".

"I set a goal to do things I wouldn't normally do".

"We've explored new places".

"We had new experiences and got new knowledge".

"I feel more confident to talk up in groups".

"Sometimes I find it hard to talk to others and feel part of the group – here, the smaller group helped and going to the different outdoor places and doing new activities".

"K, J and S are new friends I've made through the Natural Leaders group".

"It's a good opportunity to make friends".

"[the youth workers] helped me to set goals – they inspired me".

"We learned teamwork and helping each other".

"Our ideas were the bird boxes and doing work on the pond".

"[the youth workers] listened to our ideas of what we wanted to do"

"I learned thinking skills".

Young people have valued the opportunity to learn away from the classroom, with more freedom:

"Just a few hours in nature each week out of more than 36 hours in school – it's good!"

"We learned different things with [the youth workers] – it was fun learning".

"We learned outside and there weren't too many rules – and they were good rules".

"Learning in nature is fun".

"Walking in the woods and learning is so different from being stuck in the classroom".

"We learned in new places: the island on Loch Clunie, the forest, on the water when we were kayaking".

"This group is important for my learning because it's smaller and I feel more relaxed".



Some have noticed that the opportunity to participate in natural leaders has made a positive difference to their health and wellbeing and how they felt about learning in school:

"I have been more active ever since I did this"

"I felt happy coming here"

"This project has made me look forward to school"

"This helped me get interested in going back to school"

Feedback has been gathered from three participating schools to date and they confirm that the programme has had a positive impact on young people's confidence, skills and learning engagement:

"When the youth work team offered us this opportunity, we jumped at it – it seemed like such a fantastic opportunity for our children – I honestly thought, what's the catch?"

"The pupils involved have been able to have the confidence to improve the way in which they communicate with both adults and peers".

"The pupils have shown that with support they can transition to and become comfortable in a new environment".

"The pupils showed that they could take on a new level of responsibility and encouraged each other to participate".

"The project helped some of these children get through the week and engaged them in their learning.

"On return they would talk positively about their experiences, and it was good to see them engaged in it each week".

"Pupils have shown an increased level of engagement with the activities themselves and with other aspects of school life".

"The addition of X, the Community Link Worker in the project helped with transition".

"We could fill the programme for next year three times over".



Youth workers have also observed positive changes in young people's confidence, relationships and readiness to learn:

"Young person N was referred to Natural Leaders Program based on behaviour in the classroom and sporadic attendance. Since attending Natural Leaders, his behaviour has greatly improved, and he has built encouraging and positive relationships with other classmates whom he wouldn't usually mix with".

"When she first attended the Natural Leaders Program, B asked to sit with staff during all activities and team building games. She wouldn't take part in group work or discussions and was extremely shy and withdrawn. Despite this, B continued to attend Natural Leaders. Now she has gained the confidence to socialise with the group, take part in team games, and group discussions. Despite her obvious discomfort at the beginning of the programme, she showed resilience and pushed through and is an absolute delight to have as part of the group".

"C attended Natural Leaders from the beginning of the programme. Her attendance at school in general has been sporadic, but we were happy with her attendance at Natural Leaders sessions. During her time at Natural Leaders, she was very quiet and withdrawn. She would take part in team games at times but was visibly uncomfortable and wouldn't communicate with her team during problem solving or communication activities. At the Awards Ceremony / Presentation Evening, C volunteered herself to speak in the presentation in the place of a pupil who couldn't attend! Staff were blown away by her confidence and her resilience and she did a fantastic job, speaking in front of around 80 people! She has continued to grow in confidence and now takes part in all activities within the group".

"At the beginning of the program F was very shy and wouldn't speak out in a group or mix with any other pupils other than her friend G. Since attending, both girls have increased confidence and attendance at school. They will now mix with others in the group with no issues. Parents of both girls spoke with staff at the Award Ceremony / Presentation Evening and commented on the change in the girls wanting to attend school, increased motivation and better mood and general improved wellbeing when attending school".





Building Connections to Nature and an Appreciation of Natural Heritage in Place

The groups of young people involved in the Natural Leaders programme are identified as needing enhanced support with their transition from primary to secondary school. Most begin the programme with no pre-existing experience of outdoor learning or any particular knowledge of or interest in natural heritage. That said, the flexible structure of the programme and the youth-led approach has successfully engaged more than 80% of participating young people, with 39 of the 48 achieving youth awards as a result of their involvement.

Young people tell us that they have learned more about their local natural heritage

"I've learned to tell what birds have been around from their feathers".

"I learned how to build a hibernaculum".

"We learned how to look after the animals".

"We learned about new animals".

"I learned more about animals".

"I learned a lot about the outdoors".

"We ate wood sorrel and nettles!".

"I know more about nature now".

"We saw how other people had left a mess at Loch Clunie. We learned not to leave things behind in the outdoors".

And youth workers have observed that young people's confidence to explore nature has grown over the course of the programme:

"[These two young people] have become passionate about the group and their chosen wild space and are taking the programme in their stride".

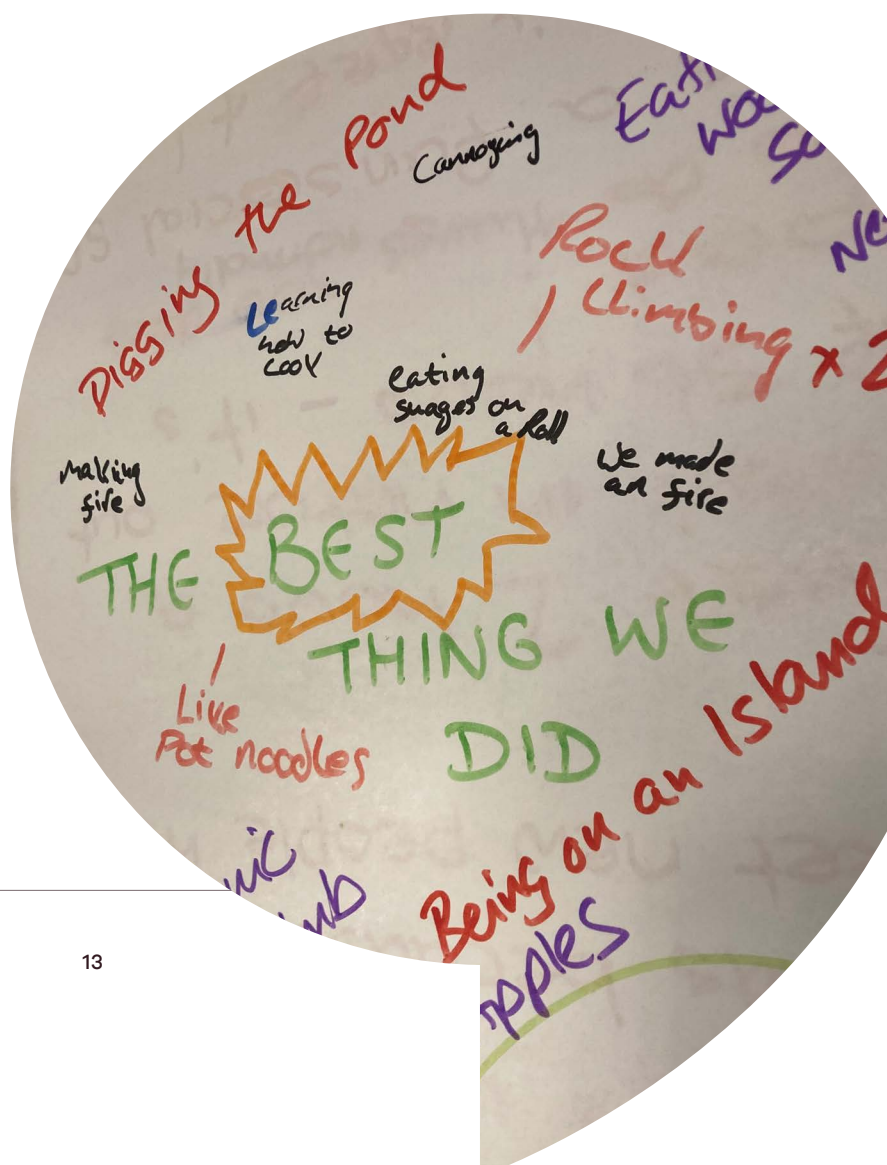
"When we first started working with G she found it a little overwhelming spending so much time outdoors and away from the comforts of the classroom, but as time went on she enjoyed the outdoors more and more and was very interested in the nature and animals we came across. G really thrived during our trip to Sky Academy to create our Natural Leaders News Broadcast. She took a leading role



as one of the news presenters and told the story of the group in an enthusiastic and clear way, taking pride in all the work and new skills she had learned”.

“H found a particular interest in learning about different animals and creatures in nature. When the Park Rangers showed us where to find different insects and gave us bug viewing boxes, H enjoyed viewing all the different creatures and comparing which trees and plants they came from”.

“J’s autism made it difficult for him to engage with the outdoor tasks independently as it was a big change to his routine in the unfamiliar surroundings. One of the sessions that J did enjoy was when we incorporated the use of our Virtual Reality headsets into the project. Young people viewed immersive videos of different natural habitats to compare the different animals and plants they recognised in each. J loved this and was very excited with getting to use the technology and it kept him engaged. [Whilst it was challenging for J] this project was a great opportunity for him to try something new and we were able to adapt the approach to his specific needs with the help of his P7 teacher and his parents”.





Learning from this first year of the Programme

It's clear that the programme has been a positive experience for many of the young people.

"I loved this so much and I'm sad it has to end, I would love to do this again".

"It was fun and useful".

"My memories come from the trips we did".

"Keep the pond-dipping".

"Keep being in the park".

"Keep everything".

If anything, they would like it to offer an even more diverse range of experiences for new groups of young people next year:

"I'd like to spend more time in the woods".

"More exploring".

"I'd like to do overnight camping".

"I'd like to go to more places".

"More teambuilding".

From a practitioners' perspective, there have been lots of interesting learning associated with the challenges of partnership working between youth workers and local natural heritage specialists – and some push-back from youth workers about the best way to introduce activities associated with natural heritage to young people at their own pace. To begin with, youth workers were hesitant about the programme – concerned that it might be too formal and structured:

"I've got to be honest, I panicked when this first landed on my desk".

"I thought you wanted us to fill young people up with facts and knowledge".

"I thought we'd need to be experts in natural heritage ourselves".



All of the youth work teams agreed that this first year of the programme has been labour intensive. Having run the programme for a year however, the practitioners say they feel more confident to build on what they have learned this year, supporting young people to follow their own interests and learning alongside them.

The youth workers have valued the expertise and the knowledge of natural heritage partners, but have found some of their inputs to be too structured and formal to fit comfortably within a youth work programme. Natural heritage partners have learned that some of the activities they would normally offer groups of young people are not well-suited for all of those involved in the Natural Leaders programme. This is due to the range of literacy levels, the challenges for some with concentration and difficulties that others experience when new adults join a group.

Through reflective conversations with partners it's clear that, going forward, we need to place a strong emphasis on young people 'experiencing and building connections with nature and place' and demystifying 'heritage expertise' and 'fact-finding' (even in a very informal way) about local wildlife and biodiversity.

A review of learning with all of the partners at the end of year 1 of the programme have led to a number of changes to the delivery of the programme in year 2. These include:

- The development of a short resource, supported by RSPB and using ideas for activities adapted from their 'Wild Challenge' award, with suggested bite-size and longer activities to help to build young people's connection to nature from the early stages of the programme onwards. RSPB have also put together a directory of potential national heritage partners for each geographical location. The draft resource is attached with this report.
- Youth work teams taking responsibility for exploring ideas for volunteering action more organically over the course of phase one of the programme, rather than through a one-off co-design session with RSPB – all partners felt that youth workers now have the confidence to have these conversations with the young people over the course of the first phase of the programme.
- A professional 'learning exchange' event between RSPB, youth workers and park rangers in each location early in year 2, where RSPB will share knowledge and expertise on building connections to nature – and an introduction to their 'Wild Challenge' award – and where youth workers can reciprocally share feedback on adapting the proposed activities so that they can be delivered in a young person-led way, more suited to the groups involved in Natural Leaders.



- A visit to an RSPB Reserve where young people can learn more about nature conservation and consider how this might be relevant in the green spaces that they where they are volunteering.

Youth work partners tell us that the strength of Natural Leaders programme lies in its flexibility as a Learning for Sustainability approach, and the fact that it makes no assumptions about what might interest young people from the outset. It starts with supporting young people to develop a personal connection to nature, before they then identify shared interests and set collective goals for protecting and developing the natural heritage of their own communities. Youth workers notice that one of the things that helps young people engage early on is that the programme is rooted in green spaces in the heart of their communities, and they understand there is an expectation that, as a group, they will take a lead in looking after these places.

"You see it in them from the beginning – they feel proud – a bit puff-chested right from the beginning, because they know they are being asked to be leaders in their own communities".

They are also enjoying the choice it offers to shape the activities that build those connections to fit each group. For example, the Perth and Kinross group particularly enjoyed adventurous survival activities and learning about nature alongside these, whereas in North Lanarkshire the group are more interested in creative arts including drawing, painting and photography.

"We can be flexible around the young people – adapt it to their interests".

"It's different – we had real independence in how young people engaged with it – no content sections that we had to stick to. And it's about their local places".

"The training from the John Muir Trust was really valuable – helped us feel confident in our approach".



Youth workers tell us the programme is a positive catalyst for building relationships between youth work and schools (and in some cases with parents). And that it serves as an effective transition programme in education, supporting young people who need enhanced support as they take the step from primary to secondary school.

"We don't get another opportunity like this to take young people out of the class to learn and build relationships with some of those that might need our support the most through high school".

Our Natural Heritage partner RSPB has introduced youth work teams to the concept of 'connections to nature'. What is clear is that this programme is helping young people make a number of other important connections – to their communities, to trusted peers and trusted adults who will continue to support them as individuals and learners. It's also helping to enable productive collaboration between school and youth work and other community stakeholders.





#InvestInYouthWork



With thanks to our funders:



With thanks to our partners:



If you would like to know more about the Natural Leaders Programme, please contact Gill Gracie, Senior Development Officer, Youth Work and School Partnerships at YouthLink Scotland ggracie@youthlink.scot

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