



National Nature Service Case Study: Leeds Rangers

Location: Skelton Grange, Leeds

The [National Nature Service](#) is a jobs programme that will enable unemployed people to find paid work and training in nature conservation at the same time as putting more resource into meaningfully improving the UK's depleted natural landscapes and seascapes. The idea is based on the most successful work programme enacted by Franklin D. Roosevelt following the Great Depression. There is an opportunity to pilot a nature volunteering programme, as part of the National Nature Service, in Leeds.

The Leeds Ranger Service would be jobs programme in which unemployed young people are trained as rangers for 12 months as a stepping stone towards a landscaping/volunteer management career, whilst simultaneously carrying out environmental management and green space creation in the city.

The opportunity for Leeds

The Leeds Ranger Service would be based at Skelton Grange Environment Centre in south Leeds, a much valued, shared community space and diverse urban nature reserve at the heart of one of England's most disadvantaged areas. Over 150,000 Leeds people experience multiple disadvantages including those living in areas ranked amongst the 10% most deprived nationally (IoMD 2010).

Nearly 30,000 people in Leeds are now unemployed. According to new figures from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) 28,915 people in the city were claiming unemployment benefit in April 2020. The number is up 60 per cent from 18,210 claimants in March 2020, as an extra 10,795 people were added to the system in a single month. 5% of all working-age adults have been affected by the pandemic.

Local authority and health services in Leeds said local people contending with low incomes, unemployment, refugee or asylum-seeking status, caring responsibilities or being in care were particularly vulnerable. They experience multiple layers of deprivation including poor health and wellbeing, low educational attainment, high unemployment and social isolation, whilst Leeds children said they needed more green spaces to play in and more activities to do outside.

The proposed Leeds Ranger Service was developed following evaluation of the successful Access to Nature in Leeds programme, and extensive research and consultation that supported a continued need for our work. This included national studies which identified that population groups concentrated in urban areas participated least in the natural environment, whilst those who could benefit most from its health, social and education benefits were least likely to access it.

Skelton Grange Environment Centre lies just two miles from the busy city centre of Leeds in the Lower Aire Valley. Its 10 acres of wildlife rich nature reserve attract deer, foxes, stoats, badgers, bats and hedgehogs, frogs, newts (including Great Crested) and toads, kingfishers, herons, woodpeckers, butterflies and many wildflowers. What would once have been a bustling scene of industry at Skelton Grange has now been taken over by nature.

How the nature work would take place

The Conservation Volunteers ([TCV](#)) has worked across the UK every day for over 60 years to create healthier and happier communities for everyone - communities where our activities have a lasting impact on people's health, prospects, and outdoor places. TCV is highly valued by local people and community organisations in Leeds, running programmes throughout the city for almost 40 years. Both its Hollybush and Skelton Grange teams have delivered successful, large scale Big Lottery projects, making a real difference to the lives of many thousands of people. TCV could coordinate the Leeds Ranger Service and employ the rangers.

The service would have 3 main areas of activity:

- Recruit and train 8 Rangers for a year, giving them volunteer management and landscaping skills.
- Provide education and play activities 3 days/week for children & young people in the natural environment, led by staff and project rangers. This offers new opportunities to stimulate a connection with nature in younger people and offers learning opportunities outside the classroom facilitated by project staff and volunteers.
- Disadvantaged adults will experience improved confidence & wellbeing and gain more skills through participation in environmental activities. To do this we said we would: Run weekly practical environmental volunteering, learning and recreational activities for disadvantaged adults, with an average of 15 people per session, led in time by a ranger.

This approach can be replicated in a range of sites using Skelton Grange as an anchor project and including local parks and greenspaces in partnership with Local Authorities, schools and community conservation groups.

The annual cost is estimated at approx £400,000 (eight ranger jobs and two supervisor posts).

Benefits

- New jobs created in 2021
- At end of the 12 months, qualified Rangers would have the skills to offer commercial landscaping and volunteer services, leading to lasting employment
- Increased access to the natural environment for 16,000 children & young people and 4,000 adults living in urban environments, offering positive & enjoyable experiences, improving their confidence, wellbeing & learning.
- Enhanced green space at Skelton Grange, and potentially at other sites.
- Increased participation by 500 disadvantaged adults, supporting them to volunteer in positive environmental activities, gain skills and improve confidence & wellbeing.
- Further improve the confidence, skills, and employability of 50 disadvantaged adults, by supporting them to take up project leader roles, increasing their ability to take up training, education, or employment opportunities.

Case studies

Luke was a project volunteer with TCV at Skelton Grange for 14 months, before going on to work as a 'Green Doctor' for Groundwork Leeds. Luke has dyslexia and so some aspects of formal education were especially challenging to him which affected his confidence. Volunteering on a mixture of education and site projects allowed Luke to build on his strengths, increase his confidence, and get a job that he is really excited about.

"The reason that I got my paid job is because I went to Skelton Grange. It gave me the chance to build on so many skills that I already had. It gave me the confidence to get my job, to be able to go into a new workplace, to work independently, and to have good communication skills with my colleagues right from the start. It's such an experience that you'll never forget it. If you want to be in nature and in the company of lots of really nice people, then do it!"

Sam was unemployed before becoming a project volunteer with TCV at Skelton Grange for 8 months before going on to work as a primary school teaching assistant.

"My volunteering was crucial for my progression into my role as a teaching assistant as the environmental education I delivered there gave me plenty of teaching experience with a range of different children. As well as the teaching experience I learnt all about Child protection and Safeguarding which were extremely useful in my professional development. As well as the work you do there you meet some amazing people and make some great connections.

I have gained many wonderful friends and memories from there."

Julie is a regular volunteer at Skelton Grange, getting involved in practical conservation and food growing work. Julie has a visual impairment and has some support from TCV leaders learning how to carry out certain tasks. She is an important member of the volunteer team and has also used the skills she has developed to help improve her garden at home.

"I got into volunteering because I was struggling to get paid work and suffering with depression, anxiety and low self-esteem, I felt I needed to do something that would get me out of the house and give me something positive to focus on. Taking up volunteering for a local charity-based project felt good and worthwhile.

I have enjoyed learning and experiencing things I have never done before. I also enjoy seeing the ongoing changes to the site which have been made over the years and knowing I have been part of those changes is a great feeling. But one of the things I enjoy most about volunteering at Skelton, is the opportunity to work alongside a team of the most friendly and welcoming people, and getting a sense of belonging, something I have never experienced much of anywhere else!"

The Ranger service could extend these experiences to many more people.