

# Nature-based Wellbeing with Finding Futures at Brighton Housing Trust



Finding Futures offers free, friendly and supported training to adult learners experiencing multiple barriers to engagement. It was set up in 2008 by Brighton Housing Trust (BHT) as part of their work to help combat homelessness, create opportunities and promote change. The John Muir Award is used as part of an accessible approach to outdoor activity and conservation training, giving recognition to individual achievements.



## Outdoor Skills, Life Skills

8 learners and 2 staff undertook the John Muir Discovery Award on Peelings Farm in East Sussex in summer 2016. Throughout the 5 day project, focused on hedge and pond conservation, the group developed practical skills and found out how to encourage wildlife. The site is a mixture of arable land and woodland so there were plenty of opportunities to learn about animals and plants across a range of habitats. It provided a valuable contrast to the urban home environments of the participants, giving opportunities to be immersed in what was, for them, an exciting new location.



**“I have found out more about wildlife and to leave things as natural as possible and at all times follow the country code. Respect your surroundings.”**  
Finding Futures Participant



Importantly the site was accessible by public transport, so participants were able to manage the journey themselves with support from staff. This led to increased confidence in accessing new places, making independent journeys and mixing with new groups of people.

Besides learning practical techniques - including how to plant, protect and harvest trees, create habitats for bees and butterflies and construct homes for hedgehogs, insects and amphibians - wildlife surveying proved popular.

Participants observed and recorded fauna at the farm, including foxes, badgers, rabbits, owls (barn and tawny), buzzards, kestrels, sparrowhawks, songbirds, weasels and hedgehogs. They were also happy to see that, before the project ended, a pair of bank voles had moved into the hibernaculum that they built in the woods!

**“I thought it was great to be outside in the wild. It made me feel peaceful.”**  
Finding Futures Participant



As well as encouraging their learning about wildlife, using the structure of the John Muir Award helped the group to develop other skills as they fulfilled the criteria of the Four Award Challenges. Team work, goal setting and planning skills all emerged as they carried out their Conserve challenges; sessions around the camp fire provided a great focus for Sharing activities including cooking together, recalling observations, and suggesting more ideas for the

site. This all helped to build further confidence between individuals and to create positive and meaningful relationships.

**“I have worked with a group of fantastic people who have overcome all sorts of challenging things. We have worked well together and helped the weaker members of the group and shared many a happy day and laughed.”**

Finding Futures Participant

## Reflections

Reflection and aspects of mindfulness practice were incorporated into the sessions. Group members spent time alone on the site, sitting quietly, looking and listening, observing colours, sounds, and smells, and sharing their experiences with their colleagues with openness and depth. This was one of the most well received aspects of the Award experience, the feeling of having space and calm very much appreciated.

**“I felt connected to nature. I had a sense of wellbeing because of what I’ve done and achieved. I’m satisfied I’ve put a little back. I’m at one with myself”**

Finding Futures Participant

## The Future

The Finding Futures project was funded by the Big Lottery Fund to support disadvantaged people to overcome barriers to learning and engagement. The group leaders were so pleased with the impact of the programme – including the integration of the John Muir Award - and the powerful, transformative impact on the individuals involved, that they intend to develop further projects on a similar basis and other outdoor activities at Peelings Farm.



**“The benefits to our learners of taking part in the John Muir Award were wonderful to see. Many would otherwise not get the opportunity to take time out from their day-to-day lives or be able to have to time to focus on themselves and get involved in their communities [...] We and our learners had the most amazing experience, something we’ll never forget.”**

Sarah Blessington, Finding Futures Project Lead, July 2016