Nature Recovery Leadership Programme

Evaluation report for North of England Extension

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Summary

This report summarises interviews with eight alumni of the Nature Recovery Leadership Programme in the North of England to understand if the impact of the Programme is continuing to deepen and grow.

Professional situation: sector, role, remit

The role and/or remit for seven of the eight interviewees had changed since being on the Programme, with two having new, more senior roles and two being regraded.

Approach to leadership

Several interviewees described feeling more authentic and confident in their leadership. Several had applied a different approach to their management style by adopting a coaching style and/or setting firmer boundaries especially with those they manage. For others, their perception of who is, and who could be a leader, had broadened.

Leading Beyond Authority

Seven of the eight interviewees felt that they were leading beyond their circle of authority since being on the Programme. Interviewees reported stepping into leadership spaces without asking for permission and feeling less afraid of failure and having to get everything right.

Working more collaboratively across boundaries

All interviewees highlighted ways in which they were working more collaboratively with others outside their organisation. Several had sought the expertise of those with lived experience beyond their organisation to strengthen their work.

Impact on self-awareness and resilience

Several alumni noted that whilst they were self-aware and reflective before, the Programme had helped them understand themselves at a deeper level, including through the core/flex concept. Several reported feeling more confident and less self-critical.

Confidence in having voice as a leader in nature recovery

Most interviewees shared examples of how they were having a stronger voice and advocating more for nature recovery in their work by setting up working groups, influencing nature recovery strategies regionally (e.g. through Local Nature Recovery Strategies) and nationally, and being more vocal in challenging others and centring nature in high profile, multi-stakeholder meetings.

New connections and relationships

Interviewees gave a mixed response to the question about making new connections and relationships on the Programme, with half describing useful connections, and the other half not. For some, existing connections were deepened, and new relationships had led to speaking opportunities and discussing and/or working on collaborative projects. Others felt that cross-sectoral representation on the Programme was limited which in turn had limited opportunities for them to deepen their network.

> *Thank you to the team for putting this together and supporting an industry when we're going through a challenging period for humanity – more and more people need to be supporting wildlife and nature, so anything helping build momentum and a network is great.*

Project background

Common Purpose have successfully delivered the Nature Recovery Leadership Programme pilot in the North of England and in Scotland with a cohort of almost 100 emerging leaders in the nature sector.

To further deepen the skills, confidence and knowledge that alumni have developed, and strengthen the network that has grown between alumni, Common Purpose extended the Programme with the North of England cohort. This included running seven online events with alumni to explore aspects of leadership development, provide space to engage on issues that are important to them and develop ideas for future collaborative working. These events took place between February – May 2025.

Project aim and approach

Common Purpose commissioned Grounded Insight to conduct a light touch, follow up evaluation to the main programme evaluation for the North of England extension. This evaluation aimed to understand if the impact of the Programme is continuing to deepen and grow by exploring how alumni are applying the key elements of the Nature Recovery Leadership Programme ('the Programme'), from putting taught elements of the Leading Beyond Authority (LBA) framework into practice, connecting with fellow alumni and taking action to be more collaborative.

The project included support to design a survey which built on the Common Purpose feedback survey used in the original Programme to capture these elements. Common Purpose gathered feedback on the additional events from alumni through an online feedback survey.

This was complemented by online interviews with eight Programme alumni who were selected based on their feedback to the online survey. Interview questions were similar to the original Programme evaluation to get a sense of change over time and how the Programme has impacted them almost half a year on.

We would like to thank the eight interviewees for giving their time and sharing their experiences for this report which summarises the findings of the interviews and relevant headlines from the alumni survey.

Findings

Professional situation: sector, role, remit

Of the 8 interviewees, 5 were from the third sector (4 environment; 1 heritage and environment), 2 from the private sector and 1 from the public sector. As with the main evaluation, most alumni were working at manager level, and most were working as partnership or programme managers of nature and natural capital projects. There was 1 CEO, 6 managers and 1 engineer. Three people had been in their role for less than a year, three for between 1-2 years, one for nearly 3 years and two people between 4-6 years. Seven out of the eight interviewees said that their role and/or remit had changed since being on the Programme:

- Two alumni had got **new and significantly more senior jobs**: one within the same organisation but moving from a graduate trainee programme up several steps to take on a manager role; another to move from a 'head of' role to become CEO of a small charity. For one of these, the programme has helped them answer an interview question about how to find common ground between stakeholders with conflicting views.

- Two alumni had advocated for and been successful in securing **re-grades** to their existing roles to reflect the scope of work which they had been doing for some time beyond the remit of their existing job descriptions – for one, this **promotion** came with **a new job title** from 'officer' to 'manager'.

- One described their role as having changed from being **less technical to more strategic,** although this change was yet to be fully defined given the period of change the organisation was in.

- Two described more **subtle changes** in their professional situation. One felt their **role had expanded**, and that they had more **creative freedom**, despite no change in their job title or remuneration. Another also described having **more freedom**, with their CEO referring to them as 'his boss', and that he was learning from them about how to interact in certain spaces to build and strengthen relationships.

Approach to leadership

Interviewees were asked whether their approach to leadership had changed through being on the Programme. Several described feeling more authentic and confident in their leadership. One described how the Programme had validated how they naturally operate in line with their values and communicate with people; and that they now 'cross metaphorical boundaries' using tools from the Programme to ensure their organisation is 'making the most of its common purpose'. This individual also said that living as someone who has been othered and racialised meant there was a temptation to protect their personal safety and keep their head under the parapet. They had gained confidence from the Programme to show up authentically as themselves and not take on a caricature of how other people may expect them to be, including how they lead:

> *Part of me is saying to myself, this is who I am, this is who you see, I am not going to change, and I value that aspect of myself… People mould you based on their expectations of a caricature of whatever they have in their mind. It is so easy to take on that caricature… I'm not going to change who I am. I'm navigating a leadership space which is a space I own. I am open to being vulnerable. I am open to the creativity that comes with that… I am interested in the creativity of leadership that can make change happen.*

Another described having more confidence to take on new tasks and responsibilities that wouldn't necessarily be expected of them, and that the connections they had made through the course with people working in different roles and organisations had enabled them to feel more confident to work beyond their usual boundaries.

Three people described applying a **different approach to their management style**, adopting the **coaching style** which was a core part of the Programme and/or setting **firmer boundaries** especially with those they manage. Interviewees described having gained insight from the Programme about their tendency to try and solve people's problems for them, be people-pleasers and/or be well liked – often to their detriment. They described how their approach had changed, that now they are better able to let people come to their own solutions – an approach one described as having *'pulled from the programme in its entirety.'*

For several people, how their approach to leadership had changed was less tangible and more closely related to their **perceptions of leadership** which had **broadened** from being on the Programme, in terms of who is, and who could be, a leader. Comments included:

> *It's less my approach and more my perception of leadership – my perception of who is and who could be a leader has changed. 'People on my board are leaders' – I used to think this because they are directors or leaders of organisations. Now I think anyone can lead - I do this all the time. Hierarchy doesn't matter. I always did it, but never thought of myself as a leader despite my behaviours and ways of working that were.*

> *I have more awareness of what it means to be a leader and the difference between being a manager and leader and when I might want to apply which. I think I was already doing some of this without understanding what I was doing.*

For one interviewee, their heightened awareness and change in perception of leadership had helped them consider whether they were more comfortable in a management space rather than a leadership space. They weren't necessarily comfortable with this heightened awareness, feeling that they had moved in the 'model of competence' from 'unconscious incompetence to conscious incompetence' with regard to their leadership. For them,

> *A less positive impact of the Programme has been that I'm trying to grapple with all the things you can do as a leader, and I think I haven't got the time for that - how do they have the time for this when I don't? … Maybe I haven't got what it takes.. maybe this comes back to the conscious incompetence.*

Leading Beyond Authority

In the feedback survey on the Programme which closed in May 2025, alumni were asked to rank on a scale of 1 - 5 if they felt better prepared to influence beyond their circle of authority and if they had begun taking action to lead beyond their circle of authority, with an average of 4 for both questions.

The survey findings are supported by the interviews in that seven of the eight interviewees felt that they were leading beyond their circle of authority since being on the Programme; whilst one person felt that this was already a strength and integral part of their role and how they work.

Interviewees described how their awareness about leading beyond their immediate circle or sphere of influence had increased. One person had mapped out their circle of authority and which organisations they wanted to influence in their first 100 days in their new role to help them build a new network. Several said that they were stepping into leadership spaces without asking for permission, were feeling less afraid of failure and of having to get everything right:

On another occasion I stepped up in terms of leadership and outside of my usual group of people, acknowledged I didn't know things and went ahead and did it anyway.

Interviewees shared inspiring examples of how they were influencing beyond their immediate sphere of authority and control including:

- Working beyond their role and remit, *'not sitting and waiting'*, to set up a northern network of Local Nature Partnerships, which was facilitating space for a pan-northern approach to nature recovery. This work in turn helped the individual have the contacts and influence to push for the creation of an All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) being established on local nature recovery.

- Working with a university as a critical friend for their Race Equality Charter Mark, which it achieved a bronze award in; and being publicly praised and thanked by the university on LinkedIn for their role in helping this to happen: a post which has *'gone a bit mad'* in its reach.

- Influencing statutory partners to agreeing to create a joint response to a major public consultation, aligning core messages and getting sign-off for a joint response at director level.

- Leading workshops and roundtable discussions on topics outside of their area of expertise in a different sector, with the confidence to say that they weren't an expert in the technical aspects of the topic.

Working more collaboratively across boundaries

A core element of Leading Beyond Authority is working more collaboratively across boundaries – including those of sector, organisation, culture and geography. In the feedback survey, alumni were asked to rank on a scale of 1 - 5 if they felt better prepared to work collaboratively and if they had begun taking action to work more collaboratively, with an average of 4 for both questions.

All interviewees highlighted ways in which they were working more collaboratively with others outside their organisation, with most of them making a connection between this and having been on the Programme.

One person highlighted several elements of the Programme which had helped them feel equipped to be more collaborative, including the talk by Julia Middleton about being open to go into someone else's world and finding a neutral space to get together (the 'town square' idea), and giving people permission to not know everything about your world. They also highlighted Programme input about storytelling as being useful in trying to find a spark with others through telling a story.

Another described how they had helped collaborate with two statutory partners on a joint business plan. They understood the different drivers of the organisations involved, that the focus of the partnership for that year needed to be on one organisation which was under political pressure, and they let the focus of the partnership be on this other partner to get the goodwill and a more joined-up, strategic discussion going:

> **"**
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> *I don't have the remit to influence decisions in those organisations – I can only try and encourage us to think and work differently, trade off priorities, that kind of thing – so I can't tell anyone what to do.*

Several interviewees described how they had sought the expertise of those with lived experience beyond their organisation to strengthen approaches to projects, which they attributed to insight they'd gained from the Programme. For example,

- Upon entering a new role in a new organisation, one had shaped a large funding bid about environmental restoration work in a diverse and deprived urban area. The bid had been drafted to include the organisation's traditional volunteer approach. With insight from being on the Programme, including asking for ideas in the open space alumni session in Newcastle, the interviewee framed the bid with an inclusive and collaborative process for community inclusion, including a dedicated community outreach role. At the time of the interview, they had just heard that the bid was successful.

- Another interviewee was curating a project about a Japanese zen garden and was conscious about not appropriating another culture so contacted the UK Japanese Society to ask them to sense check and add to their ideas – something they may not have done before being on the Programme.

- Since being on the Programme an interviewee had become a non-voting director of a child poverty action charity in their city which included a smaller place-based group working in a neglected and deprived neighbourhood. There was a drive from the region's Combined Authority to plant trees, but the interviewee intervened and pressed for the neighbourhood group to be supported in something they felt they really needed. This culminated in a meeting between residents, police, politicians and staff from the Combined Authority in which the residents put forward their views for what they wanted and needed in their area.

Impact on self-awareness and resilience

Several alumni noted that they were self-aware and reflective before, but that the Programme had helped them understand themselves at a deeper level. Several drew on how the core/flex concept had helped them understand themselves better, especially in relation to why certain things feel more comfortable than others, for example:

> **I'm better able to see where my competencies are and the areas I want to work on more... you don't have to be brilliant at everything – it was inspiring that all types of people have things to bring.**

Several said that they were less self-critical because the Programme had helped them be kinder on themselves:

> **I think I'm less hard on myself, it's ok to have weaknesses as well and not lose sleep about these sorts of things. Hearing that people find work difficult and rewarding in equal measures.**

> **It reinforced the power of questions and open questions. I've always been one that throws an 'out there' question in there, and it's reinforced that this is helpful behaviour. And that I don't need to know everything and I can try and find out.**

Several expressed that they found hearing from accomplished leaders on the course about the challenges they had faced and failures they'd experienced reassuring and inspiring:

> **It's easy to see leaders as effortlessly gliding machines... I recently had a leadership challenge at work... it was difficult...hearing the speakers really helped.**

Having said that, one would have liked more practical examples and application about, say, time management and prioritisation from the high-level leaders.

One interviewee described how the coaching sessions had been transformational and revolutionary, both professionally and personally, whilst another had secured some additional coaching on a sponsored programme tailored for women working in male-dominated environments. They had realised that some of their doubts about being a leader were coming from themselves, and on the additional coaching programme had worked further on imposter syndrome and perceptions of confidence, and that they wouldn't have applied for the sponsored programme if they hadn't done the Common Purpose one because they wouldn't have perceived themselves as a leader.

Interviewees tended not to mention resilience, besides one – who said that:

> *I've always been fairly resilient, if anything it's made me less likely to carry on and be put upon, which is why I applied for the regrade as I was working at a level I wasn't being recognised for. I already had a lot of resilience but now recognise that I do deserve to be paid fairly at the level I'm at.*

Confidence in having voice as a leader in nature recovery

In the feedback survey, alumni were asked to rank on a scale of 1 - 5 if they felt more confident in their voice as a leader working in nature recovery, which scored an average of 4 from 42 responses. Most interviewees shared examples of how they were having a stronger voice and advocating more for nature recovery in their work.

One interviewee, for example, explained that they now saw themselves as a leader, which in turn has changed the way their organisation is perceived and the level of strategic influence it is having. They gave examples of their organisation now being involved in: conversations with the two local authorities on the devolution deal; developing the area's economic strategy; having oversight for the area's Local Nature Recovery Strategy; and discussions on Defra's Land Use Consultation.

Another described becoming aware through the Programme, especially its coaching elements, of their unique skills and position in their company and how nature recovery was falling between the cracks of siloed working. To address this, they set up a working group on nature recovery that spanned the business, from nature-based solutions in water treatment to carbon capture and Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) criteria.

Others described being more vocal in challenging others in high profile, multi-stakeholder meetings, for example around Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) being treated separately to nature recovery and of the need to 'centre people in nature'. Another had decided to increase the nature recovery potential of the garden they managed by creating a wildflower meadow in it to coincide with the attached art gallery's Monet exhibition.

Although several didn't feel that their individual voice in nature recovery was stronger, one highlighted the power of belonging to an alumni network working for nature recovery which could help them have a voice in areas where they currently don't but might want to in the future.

New connections and relationships

In the feedback survey, alumni were asked to rank on a scale of 1 - 5 if they felt that the Programme community will help them to have a greater impact on nature recovery, which scored an average of 4 from 42 responses.

Interviewees gave a mixed response to the question about making new connections and relationships on the Programme, with half describing useful connections, and the other half not. Of those who had made relationships, they described deepening connections with those they already knew, and of meeting new people:

> **Having the connections made through the course to people working in different roles and organisations has enabled me to feel more confident to work outside of my organisation… a new gang of people.**

For some, the new connections made had led to speaking opportunities and discussing and/or working on collaborative projects and events. For one, this was leading to discussions about health and wellbeing with another of the alumni and 'what a nature for health movement in the north might look like'. Another described now knowing people in different sectors including business, specialist groups and community groups, and having 'more of a network to enable that collaboration'. They had, for example, secured a speaker for their organisation's conference by asking another of the alumni who worked with them. They described the value of this network:

> **So this sort of thing, a community of people… there's goodwill… in professional networks it takes a while to build up trust, there might be misgivings or suspicion especially with organisations competing for resources - but this feels like it's been smoothed off, it's blunted our elbows.**

The networking from the Programme therefore seems to have made introductions, built relationships and deepened some of the alumni's networks, accelerating the process of working together and making it easier to connect into certain organisations.

For others, there were some connections, but they hadn't necessarily proved useful yet, they were more considered to be an address book and of having latent potential. Others expressed some disappointment that there hadn't been much cross-sectoral representation on the Programme and as such, they felt it had been a missed opportunity for them to deepen their network. Several mentioned that whilst the peer coaching groups had been useful, they had fizzled out, and several also mentioned being connected with other alumni on LinkedIn and liking their posts and generally feeling an awareness of the network.

Additional feedback

At the end of the interviews, alumni were asked if they'd like to share any other feedback or thoughts. Some similar themes were raised in response to this question as in the main evaluation, including:

- The intensity of the residential made it difficult to absorb and be present in the last afternoon of the third day.

- The one-day alumni gathering in Newcastle being too short and too far to travel for one day, with a preference for a longer (e.g. 2 day) alumni gathering.

- A desire for handouts and notes on the course material, so that it was possible to return to refresh and deepen learning.

- A desire to have people from more mixed professional backgrounds on the course, as it was felt there were too many people with a 'nature focus' which meant too many people were coming from the same perspective, resulting in a missed opportunity to understand how to get nature embedded into other sectors.

- Mixed views on peer coaching, with several interviewees querying what they had taken from it and if the time would be better used elsewhere in the Programme.

One interviewee said they had recommended the Programme to colleagues, and some people had felt that they weren't suitable for it as they were 'too old' or 'not a leader' – which could be helpful to be aware of in marketing for future programmes.

Finally, several interviewees expressed their appreciation for the team and the Programme:

> *Thank you to the team for putting this together and supporting an industry when we're going through a challenging period for humanity – more and more people need to be supporting wildlife and nature, so anything helping build momentum and a network is great.*

> *It would be good for more collaborative programmes like this to happen. If the organisations involved were interested, if there was an opportunity for a collaborative thing every year where emerging leaders could get together and network and have a day of workshops, this would be really valuable; it's a gap. People got a lot out of it. Having the programme repeat every year would be good, but if not, something in recognition of how valuable it's been. It feels like there should be a pan-northern get together about this.*