

## **Case Study: Growing Skills and Confidence through Wildlife and Woodland Conservation**

The *Wildlife and Woodland Conservation Skills* project at Newbattle Abbey College gave young people in Midlothian the chance to gain hands-on experience in wildlife monitoring, woodland management and sustainable conservation, while developing the confidence, teamwork and motivation to take the next step in learning or employment.

Funded through Midlothian Council's *No One Left Behind* grant, the project was aimed at 16–25-year-olds who were unemployed or not engaged in education. It offered a 10-week accredited learning experience at SCQF Level 5, followed by a five-week volunteering placement within the College estate. Two groups completed the programme between October 2024 and March 2025, and every participant chose to continue into the volunteering phase. Eleven young people achieved the *Forest and Outdoor Learning Award: Developing Sustainable Skills for the Forest and Outdoors*.

### **Learning through Nature in a College Setting**

A key strength of the project was that it took place on the Newbattle Abbey College estate. For many participants, this was their first experience of learning within a college environment, and the sense of belonging, structure and purpose it offered was transformative. The woodland and grounds provided a safe, supportive setting for young people to reconnect with learning in an active and practical way, supported by skilled staff who understand how outdoor learning can promote wellbeing, confidence and personal growth.



As one participant reflected,

*“This course has helped me get more socially comfortable and has helped me with my mental state through getting me outside in nature.”*

The project evolved naturally through the seasons and events on the estate. The woodland itself, with its wildlife and changing rhythms, became the classroom. The group used trail cameras to observe wildlife, recording species such as badgers, foxes, roe deer and birds including wrens, blackbirds, buzzards and long-tailed tits. They built a bird hide, installed feeders and monitored frogspawn in the pond, learning about life cycles, habitats and sustainability through direct experience.

### **Sustainable Practice and Innovation**

Sustainability was woven throughout the course, helping participants develop a deeper understanding of environmental responsibility and the value of resource management. After storms brought down several trees, the group repurposed the timber to build a dead hedge with an integrated badger highway, infilled new habitats, and used sawdust and logs to form natural pathways.

*“This course made me feel like I was making an impact.”*

In the meadow, learners planted yellow rattle to promote biodiversity and reused turf to create a turf bench. These activities brought to life wider ideas about sustainable practice and the Scottish Sustainable Development Goals. Participants identified that their work contributed to SDG 15: Life on Land and SDG 16: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions, recognising that caring for the environment also helped them build empathy, teamwork and resilience.



## **Building Pathways and Personal Development**

The project supported young people in seeing themselves as capable learners and active contributors to the environment around them. Being based on a college campus made the experience aspirational and enabled participants to envision future learning pathways they may not previously have considered.

*“The course has given me a better connection to myself and those around me. This is something that nobody can take away from me.”*

Many participants improved their confidence, social skills and mental wellbeing, reporting that the experience had a lasting impact on their motivation and outlook. As they worked together, they also developed key employability skills such as planning, communication and problem solving.

## **Outcomes and Impact**

The project achieved significant outcomes for learners and the community:

- 11 young people achieved a national SCQF Level 5 qualification.
- 100% completed an additional five-week volunteering placement.
- 1 participant progressed to Forest and Outdoor Learning Leadership course at SCQF level 8
- 1 participant progressed to a full time course in Rural Skills at Newbattle Abbey College
- Participants developed practical skills and confidence that support progression to further study and employment.
- Biodiversity and sustainability were enhanced across the college estate.

As one participant summarised, *“Before this, I didn’t know how much life there was in the woods or how we could help it. Now I see every footprint, every sound, differently. We’ve helped protect something real.”*

## **Recognition and the Future**

The *Wildlife and Woodland Conservation Skills* project has been shortlisted for an RSPB Nature of Scotland Award (awards ceremony on 20<sup>th</sup> Nov 2025), recognising its success in combining environmental action, education and inclusion. It exemplifies the Midlothian CLD theme *Improving Pathways for Learning, Personal Development and Employment* by showing how practical, outdoor learning within a college environment

can inspire confidence, open progression routes and connect young people to both nature and their own potential