

Highland Perthshire Communities Land Trust HPCLT

Evaluation of Rural Skills Training



July 2025

Innovation Voucher Report

Centre for Living Sustainability, UHI Inverness

Funded by Scottish Funding Council and Highland Perthshire Communities
Land Trust

By Vicky Johnson, Sarah Wagner, Heather Hamilton and Ian Harper

Acknowledgments

The facilitation of the evaluation was supported by Fred Cochrane.

Thank you to the dedicated apprentices and past trainees who participated in this evaluation. We also thank the Trustees, and particularly Richard Paul and Kirsten Parrish for their support with the evaluation. Thanks for the inspiration from Suzann Barr at Abriachan and to Lalith Welamedage for initiating this project.

Team

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From HPCLT:

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A large number of young participants showed dedication and wanted to express their opinions to add evidence to the evaluation about the impact the rural skills training has had on their lives. This report is designed to inform planning at HPCLT and to provide an accompanying guide to build on the already excellent ongoing evaluation process that the project manager has been developing over the past few years.

Background to this project

About the HPCLTs rural skills training

In 2002, HPCLT took ownership of 418 hectares of land in rural Perthshire near to the town of Aberfeldy. Overgrazed by sheep and deer at that time, it has since been the focus of community-based land restoration. The land contains the hill Dùn Coillich (572m) and consists of moorland, limestone outcrops and regenerating woodland. The aim was to create a wildlife conservation area.

Specifically, with the overall aim to provide benefit to communities within Highland Perthshire, the Charitable Purposes of the Trust are to:

1. advance environmental protection and improvement by the restoration of native woodland and other habitats as important means of conserving and increasing biodiversity.
2. to advance education and training in ecology, land management and rural skills
3. facilitating opportunities for educational establishments and other organisations; and to provide and organise recreational opportunities, primarily by providing access.

An aspect of this work has been rural skills training for youth from the area. HPCLT has been running its Rural Skills Training Programme since 2016, and nearly 100 young people have completed the course to date. These youth training courses each ran part time for 20 weeks, covering rural land management skills, such as dry-stone dyking, brush-cutting and chain saw work, tree planting and maintenance, footpath work and fencing, all helping to prepare trainees for employment in the land-based sector. The Trust thus has a wealth of experience working with young people from a wide variety of backgrounds interested in working outdoors, including experience of their varying needs. They also have contacts with many employers and prospective employers in the local area. Seventy percent of the young people that have attended the training have had a significant barrier to employment. Seventy-five percent of the trainees have since moved on to secure long-term employment in the land-based sector following their engagement with the trust. This evaluation aimed to capture the wider impacts of the training programme on the lives of the young people that take part in the training.

About the evaluation

This evaluative research, funded through a Scottish Funding Council Innovation Voucher, will assist in the formal evaluation of the training programme in three ways:

- Understand the value of the rural skills training programme to the trainees themselves. What has been the long-term impact on participants' employability and personal development? This will address both their perceptions around how it helped with their employability, but also addressing 'softer' outcomes like confidence and leadership skills.
- Assess the programme's impact on employment opportunities and the understanding of land management among local youth.
- Evaluate the perceptions of other stakeholders including trustees and employers towards the of the rural skills training.

The evaluation was co-constructed in order to ensure that methods were youth focused and engaged many of the young trainees and past trainees in order to understand how the course had an impact on their lives. Where possible in the time allowed for the

research the team also engaged with trustees and local employees (mainly through participation at a trustees' session and at the AGM) in order to understand how they also perceive the value of the training.

An Important part of the process involved presenting the findings from the evaluation at the Annual General Meeting, attended by over 50 people, and over 25 of the stakeholders further participated in action planning. This helped to raise the profile of the training programme for the Trust and for community members, partners and employers across the region.

The team at the Centre for Living Sustainability have also worked with HPCLT to refine the current evaluation of the programme so that they can continue to gather relevant evaluation data themselves. Enhancing HPCLT's ability to continue to undertake and improve methods of self-evaluation will aid in securing funding, and optimising support for participants.

This strategic focus ensures HPCLT's continued success in empowering young individuals in Highland Perthshire.

About the outputs

This report details the methodology and findings from the evaluation.

The associated toolkit for ongoing and long-term evaluation is an accompanying document.

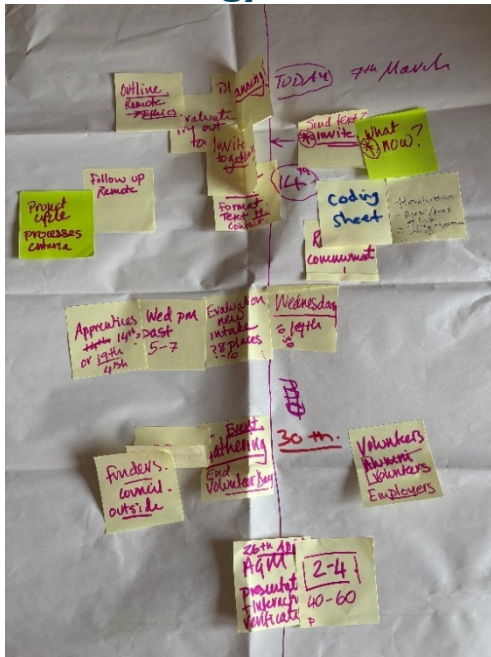
Our Aim

To evaluate the impact of the rural skills training on young people’s lives and to enhance the capacity of the staff and the Trustees in youth-focused, ongoing and long-term evaluation.

Our Objectives

- To understand the positive and negative experiences of young people who had participated in the rural skills training as it has developed over the years.
- To gain broader perspectives from trustees and broader stakeholders about the rural skills course.
- To inform ongoing development of the rural skills training in HPCLT.
- To inform ongoing evaluation of the rural skills training course by HPCLT
- To co-create a toolkit for ongoing and long-term evaluation

Methodology and Timeframe



the peer research team in March 25

The project was planned initially remotely and then kicked off with a meeting at HPCLT in early March 2025. The HPCLT (Heather Hamilton and Ian Harper) and CLS team (Vicky Johnson and Sarah Wagner) decided to take an intensive approach to the evaluation, with all research conducted in March and April 2025.

An insider/ outsider and capacity building co-constructed approach to the evaluation was agreed. In this way the evaluation builds on the methods already employed by HPCLT, largely developed by Heather Hamilton whilst also having the team at CLS being able to stand back from the processes and talk to participants with and without HPCLT workers present.

This capacity building approach is relevant to the participatory action research approach taken by the Centre for Living Sustainability (see below under Community Assessment and Action methodology). In this way the methods planned and discussed with the full team could be tried

and tested by the HPCLT team for potential continued use in the ongoing evaluation. The CLS team also planned sessions separately to the HPCLT team so that they could get constructive criticism from the young people who had participated in the rural skills training.

Community Assessment and Action

The methodology we used in this project is based on the ‘Community Assessment and Action’ method developed by team member, Prof Vicky Johnson with her colleague Dr Robert Nurick ([Development Focus](#)). This methodology was originally devised during pilot trialling of participatory methods from the global South and subsequently applied across the UK (in 38 regeneration, local government and third sector programmes) and internationally (for example, in Nepal, South Africa and Indonesia). This community-driven approach develops in-depth evidence on local values and priorities through creative and participatory methods, alongside the collection of participant profiles.

A key part of this method is that the research itself is co-conducted by stakeholders. Community stakeholders are trained in visual and participatory methods, concepts of participation, and ethics and safety aspects. For this project, the team at HPCLT were involved in planning the evaluation so it fits and builds on their framework for ongoing

evaluation. Another key difference to other forms of participatory action research is the development of a coding system. The HPCLT team worked on this to ensure that the youth profiles and coding was relevant to the participants and planned tools that they felt may be applicable later in the ongoing evaluation they carry out for each cohort.

CAA uses and develops methods that are appropriate to the participants and context. In this evaluation the analysis of the already collected evaluation information that HPCLT has developed and used over the past cohorts was seen to be an important starting point. The HPCLT and CLS team decided that some of the questions asked to young trainees during the courses could be revisited but using participatory visual methods (see below) so that these could be tested for future evaluation. This would be facilitated for some of the sessions with HPCLT members so that capacity in facilitation and use of the methods could be built and without HPCLT to gather information without key members of the skills training delivery team being present. Alongside this, the HPCLT team felt it was important to reach out to past trainees remotely in order to carry out an online survey. This was developed by the evaluation team so that an online survey could be sent to all previous participants on the courses and analysed by the CLS team, anonymised and without sight from the HPCLT team.

The stages of the process

Setting up the evaluation and revisiting the aims, objectives and timeframe

A joint inception meeting (9/3/25) was held between Heather Hamilton and Ian Harper to agree on the overall approach and for the CLS team to carry out initial evaluation testing a couple of participatory methods. The H Evaluation tool and the participatory project timeline were carried out in this first session (See below). In this way the HPCLT team agreed the H evaluation would be appropriate to use for other stakeholders and a plan for the following months was developed.

Connection to young people and trustees/ other stakeholders

A second meeting (16/3/25) was planned in order for the CLS team to work together with HPCLT and a couple of the trustees visiting the project. In this meeting CLS undertook further evaluation discussions using the H Evaluation tool. At this meeting the approach to be taken with more of the trustees and broader stakeholders at the AGM was also planned. The HPCLT team also worked on further co-construction of the evaluation including the participatory tools to be used and the different meetings with current and past cohorts. A third visit by CLS (19/3/25) consisted of meeting to test the H Evaluation tool and other participatory methods including rivers of life and photo narrative so that these could be built into ongoing evaluation (see accompanying document on the ongoing evaluation framework).

During this visit past cohorts of trainees were also visited at a school and invited to an evening pizza night to participate in evaluation research at the HPCLT offices.

A BBQ was organised on the last Sunday of March (30/3/25) in order to involve other cohorts to participate in the evaluation. Whilst recognising this may catch participants who wanted to be engaged, the evaluation team were able to go into depth into aspects of the rural skills training that had worked and that hadn't worked so well and to determine further action that may be taken for further improvements. There were two groups of past cohorts who participated in the H evaluation and timeline mapping, including the past, during the course and future skills, employment and feelings.

The project team presented the research findings to over 50 Trustees and broader stakeholders at the AGM on April 26 2025 and involved over 25 attendees in action planning. This was an opportunity for them to add comments and agree to take responsibility, support or disagree with suggested actions/ recommendations from the evaluation.

Developing a safety and ethical framework

An important part of the research process was to ensure that our methods were ethical and safe for all those involved. When designing our research activities, we considered how to meaningfully involve young people and other stakeholders in the project, including people who may have difficulty expressing their opinions or reading and writing. To help more people get involved, we used visual methods such as drawing and selecting images to convey opinions and ideas.

Our ethical framework includes developing the coding system so that young people and broader stakeholders could freely express their opinions whilst their direct quotes and perspectives expressed during the evaluation were anonymised at source. The project received ethics approval from the University of the Highlands and Islands Research Ethics Committee (ETH2425-0684).

Developing and facilitating the tools

At the planning meetings and during some of the sessions, methods were planned also depending on the what the HPCLT team may be comfortable to integrate into their ongoing evaluation afterwards and what they felt may be suitable for the trainees and the particular context of the project.

For example, much of the evaluation was carried out outside at the field site where the rural skills training was delivered so methods needed to take that into account. For example, photos were used in a timeline to allow young people to go and find metaphors in the environment to express how they felt about their employment (or lack of) and their prospects relating to rural skills at different points in a jointly constructed river/ road. The evaluation H was also felt to be transportable and easy to use both inside and outside with young people and broader stakeholders. For the present cohort, as at an earlier stage, a simple ranking line was used to gauge young people's feelings on the first day of the evaluation and to feed in ideas for building confidence at the beginning of the training (detailed in the framework for ongoing evaluation).



Examples of Evaluation H

Coding and documentation

A coding system was developed to monitor who was involved in the research and to ensure that the different issues and actions identified could be traced to individual participants. The coding sheet recorded details on participants' age and gender identity, as well as which cohort the young people were from and what their current employment situation is (see coding sheet). Each participant was assigned a number so that they did not identify themselves on the participatory methods sheets. The coding system ensures that stakeholder viewpoints are kept confidential while enabling the researchers to collect detailed information on the needs and priorities for different stakeholders and young people of different gender, age and cohort.

No.: _____
Age: _____
Gender identity: _____
Ethnicity: _____
Place of residence – what is the first half of your post code? _____
Dun Coilich course – Year: _____ Intake: Feb / Aug
What best describes your current situation?
<input type="checkbox"/> Permanent employment
<input type="checkbox"/> Casual employment
<input type="checkbox"/> Self-employed
<input type="checkbox"/> Education / school
<input type="checkbox"/> Unemployed
Which of the following describes your living situation?
<input type="checkbox"/> Living with family
<input type="checkbox"/> Living independently
<input type="checkbox"/> Having caring or parental responsibilities
<input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____

Coding documentation sheet used in this project to gather relevant details about participants.

Analysis, verification and prioritisation

In Community Assessment and Action, the analysis is ongoing throughout the project and informs the next steps in the research process. In this project, the research team conducted an initial analysis of findings following the first workshops. This resulted in the identification of some key themes arising in the research, which the team grouped together in charts to present, verify and add comments to at the AGM.

Who we spoke with

The evaluation involved at least participation from **85 people** and includes **63 responses from young people** who are on or have completed the rural skills training.

This included 32 young people and 5 adults (2 staff and 3 trustees) involved in the programme in the participatory workshops and case studies. There were an additional 19 broader community stakeholders who participated in the verification event. The questionnaire was 31 returned by young people.

Information collected on our coding documentation sheet enabled us to track participants' related experiences so we could better understand peoples' different perspectives.

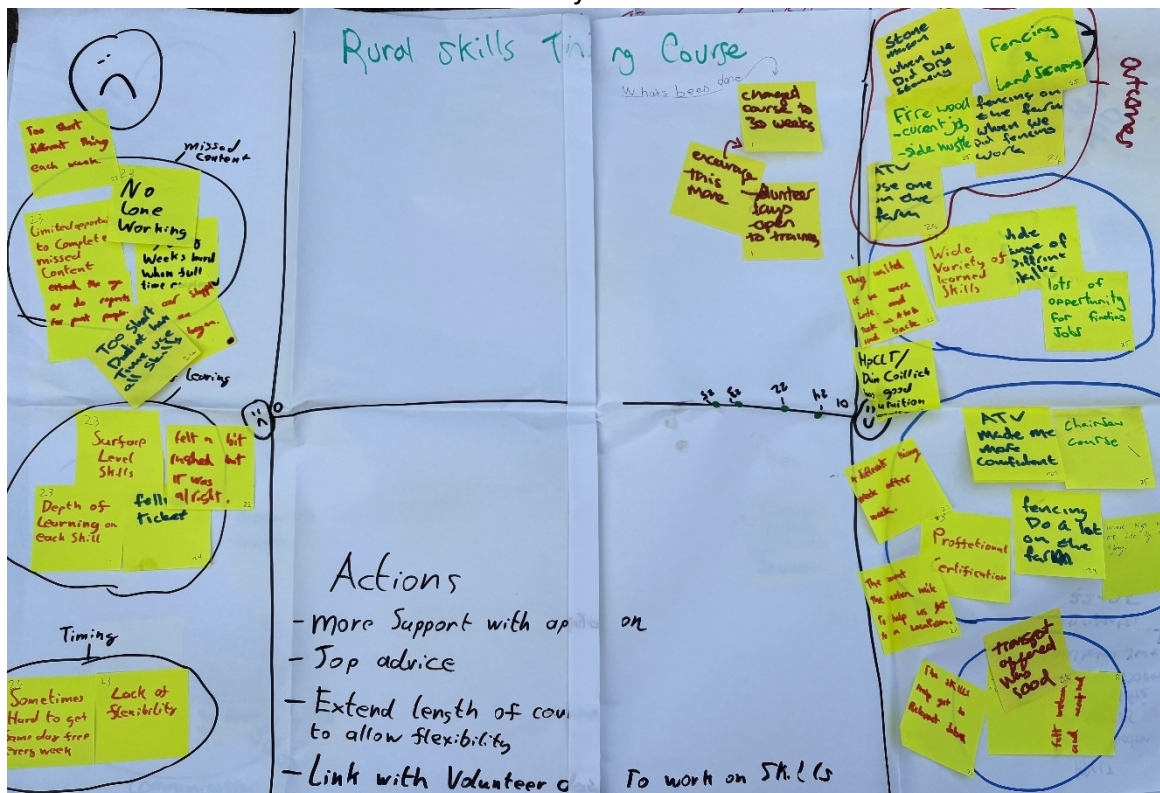
Detailed evaluation work was carried out with 2 HPCLT staff and 3 trustees. Then detailed participatory evaluation with 32 young trainees, 9 in the current cohort and 23 from past cohorts. Of these young people, 8 were female and the rest male and their ages were 16-30 years.

Our research methods/ tools

The following provides an outline of the methods used in the evaluation. Full details of these tools can be found in the accompanying 'Rural Skills Course **Evaluation Toolkit**' (HPCLT/ CLS UHI Inverness, June 2025). Also see Dev Focus UK toolkit [participatory methods](#).

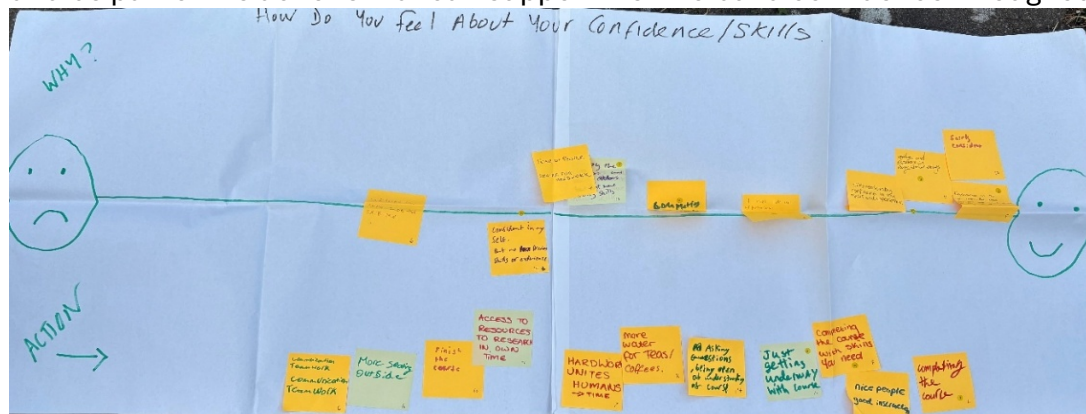
Evaluation H

This is a method where participants work in a group to first provide an overall score for the rural skills training course along a ranking line – they then provide the reasons why they liked or disliked aspects of the training. Clustering the reasons on both sides initiates detailed discussion and any actions to be taken can be added.



Ranking Line (used with current cohort)

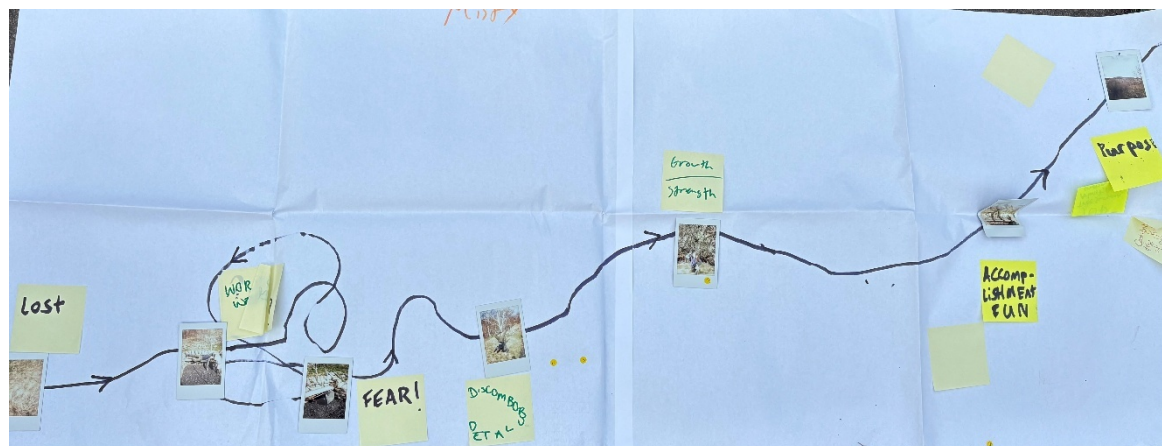
This is a method that is similar to the Evaluation H but can be used earlier in the process of ongoing monitoring and evaluation for the current cohort. It asks more about the feelings in terms of confidence and skills and can be used closer to the start of the training so participants can express their feelings coming into the course and be part of the actions that can support them to build confidence throughout.



Rivers and Roads of life/ rural skills training (with and without photos)

In a River or Road of Life, participants can visually represent both difficult points and positive experiences, for example with dams and potholes or bridges and green lights. Key details were noted on the River or Road of Life sheets that enabled us to develop insight into the issues outlined in the Evaluation H. It also helps to understand the impact of the rural skills training on the confidence and situation of the young people participating.

Creating rivers/ roads of life using photographs with groups of young people



Creating rivers/ roads of life with individual young people

These included headings of past, before/ during and after the course, now and future. Young people were asked to reflect on their feelings and social skills. See examples in text.

Online survey

All of the past cohorts of young people were asked if they would like to participate in an online survey and also come to a pizza night and a BBQ where they could participate in evaluation workshops. This was initiated through existing WhatsApp groups set up by the lead facilitator and different cohorts and indeed were evaluated as being helpful for follow up communication and support.

Details of the questions given in the survey are in section 2 of this report. These questions were developed by the full team CLS/HPCLT and the platform enabled total anonymity in responses so coming straight to the CLS team at UHI Inverness for analysis. This was to compliment and triangulate findings and also provide space for totally anonymous feedback from young participants.

Action Planning Grids with prioritisation and details

Verification and action planning was carried out with broader stakeholders at the Annual General Meeting of the HPCLT and then with the core team of CLS, HPCLT staff and trustee (authors) at a reflection and debriefing meeting to finalise the findings, actions/ recommendations and final report.

The following is an example of the action planning grids used for each theme at the community stakeholder session following the AGM of HPCLT in May 2025.

ACTION	PRIORITY	WHY?	DETAIL
→ widen access, open the course to people in other regions	•••	[Sticky note]	
→ Prioritise age and gender diversity in each cohort (registration selection)			[Sticky note] [Sticky note]
→ Subsidise travel for trainees coming from further away	•	[Sticky note]	
→ Review transport, access to minibus / establish regular pick-up points	••••	[Sticky note]	
→ Create a more flexible schedule w opportunities to make-up missed sessions			[Sticky note]
→ Fund resources for back-up activities (bad weather no show) (e.g. indoor building project, mapping, ecological management)		[Sticky note] [Sticky note]	[Sticky note]

FINDINGS

Our findings are presented across three main areas:

- What current and past trainees told us in the participatory sessions (32 participants)
- What past trainees told us in the online survey (31 respondents)
- What the HPCLT staff, trustees and broader stakeholders told us about the rural skills training participants (24 respondents)



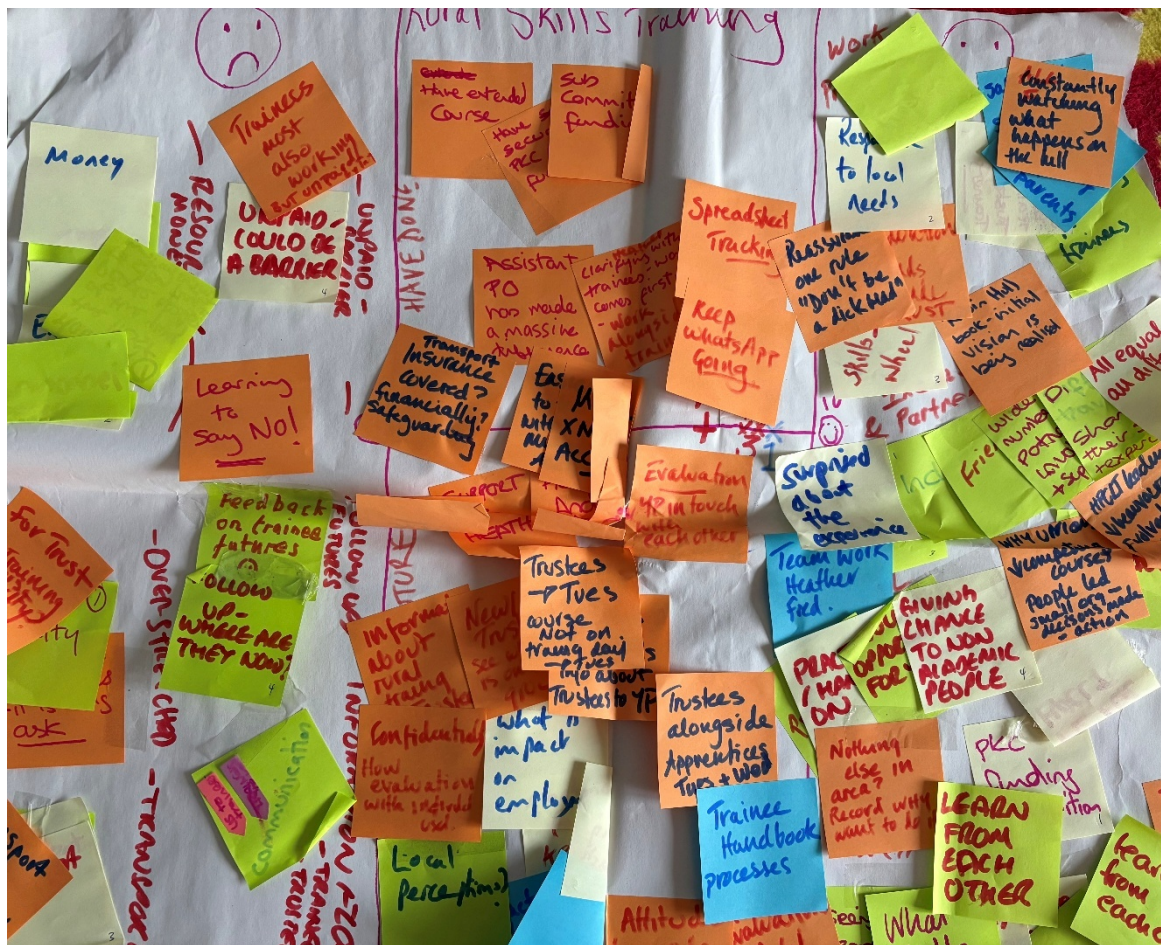
I. Participatory workshops with trainees

Different points of view from the trainees

The evaluation included the present cohort and past cohorts. The following combines the perspectives of all cohorts although there is some analysis of how cohorts changed over the lifetime of the project within the discussion.

Information about the positive aspects, constructive criticism and action that could further improve

Key themes (in words of the young people)



What's working

Good fun 32-37 from different cohorts
Best way of doing things for your capabilities – gives you a work ethic 33 32-27
Life skills & practical skills for work 32-37
New skills – fencing, working with timber – most of participants (add numbers?)
Using skills in new jobs – eg. stone mason – drystone dyking, fencing, ATV on farm 24 fencing and landscapes 25 spraying, First aid 19-25 brushcutting, chainsaw, quad biking, tree planting 26-31
Meeting new people/ Making friends/ other people on the course 15,16, 19, 20, 21, 22 sociable 26 social/ team building 32-37
Learnt to trust myself and become confident 15
Confidence re career change 19
Different age groups 15, 16, 26-31
Varied learning skills
HPCLT good reputation locally
Professional certification – chainsaw, spraying... course tickets eg. LANTRA – transfer to NCPT.
Unique to get all the tickets
Tickets are free 26-31
Further use of skills and confidence in ATV, fencing used on farm, stone dyking
Continue practical skills also with no certification
Transportation
Lots of opportunities for finding jobs 25
Actively helping to Network with employers 32-37
Fred and Heather! 19-22, 32-37
Working outside
Course organisation and timing good.
Good timing 10-3pm

What's not

Fear – abseiling!
Flexibility/ timing “sometimes hard to get some days free every week” 23
Level and depth of learning on different skills – sometimes rushed 22, 23, 24
Limited opportunity to catch up on missed content 23, 24 no lone working 23
May need to go back to basics – foundation material needed 19
Lack of skills consolidation 19
Woodland management 19
Peatland restoration 18
Stopping the car after a joke!
The weather could be brutal (those who started in Feb...)

Some quotes:

“I found it a lot to take on at first when trying something new. But learnt to trust myself and become confident” 15

“Having a mix of different age groups meant that I came to see different pathways and opportunities” 15

“They often met us and got us to a location” 22

“Being included in a community”

“Connection with people, team and people running courses” 27

“Community based, productive skills and giving back” 27

“Main reason project works is because of Heather” 36

“It’s like having a job without having a job – learning without knowing it” 33





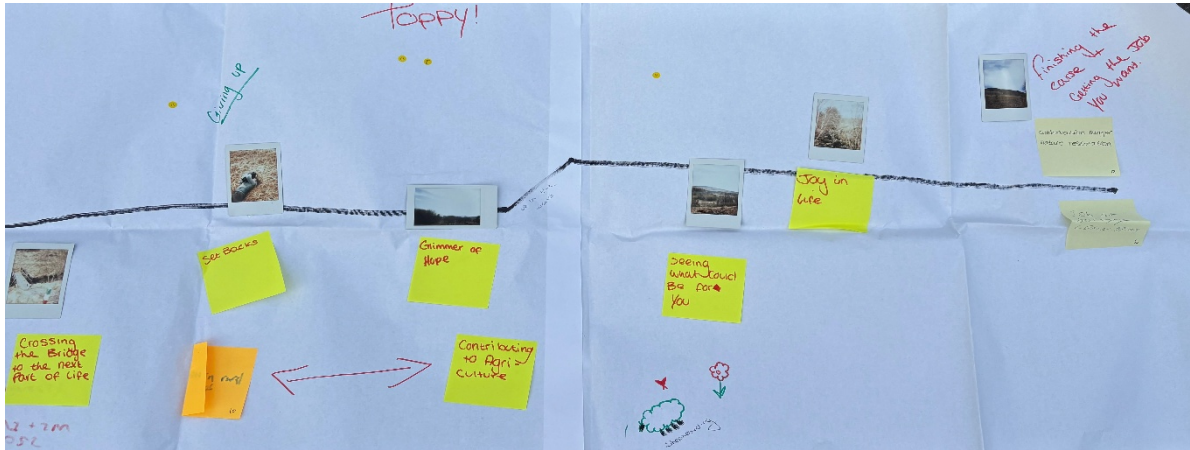
Actions

- Could add livestock/ farming-based things 15, 16
- More job advice/ applications 22-25
- Link to volunteer days to work on skills for experience 22-25
- Extend length of course to allow flexibility 22-25 (already done)
- Do August course earlier and winter course later (already done) 26-31
- Continue minibus – pick up places 26-31 32-37
- Subsidise travel 26-31, 32-27
- Continue communication between young people using WhatsApp – Heather also keeps in contact with us through this 26-31
- Communicating through website more 27
- Adding alternatives – Plan B, more on project planning 36
- Could add more map skills, navigation, plant ID, bird boxes, tool maintenance, pressure washing, foraging 36
- Need more advertising 31 information about other courses and work 30
- Trainee retention from further afield so young people attracted to area 31
Could include more people living far away so young people come to area 36
- Could visit other groups regionally and even internationally 31
- Learn more ways to be self-employed 36
- Keep course varied and suitable for all 32-37
- Keep giving tickets – really helpful for employers 32-37

Young people's timelines - changes in their feelings/ impact on their lives

The following timelines show what a profound impact the rural skills training has had on the lives of the young people who have participated.

PAST



Bottom of the ladder

Giving Up

Crossing the bridge to the next part of life

DURING

Glimmer of hope

Contributing to agriculture

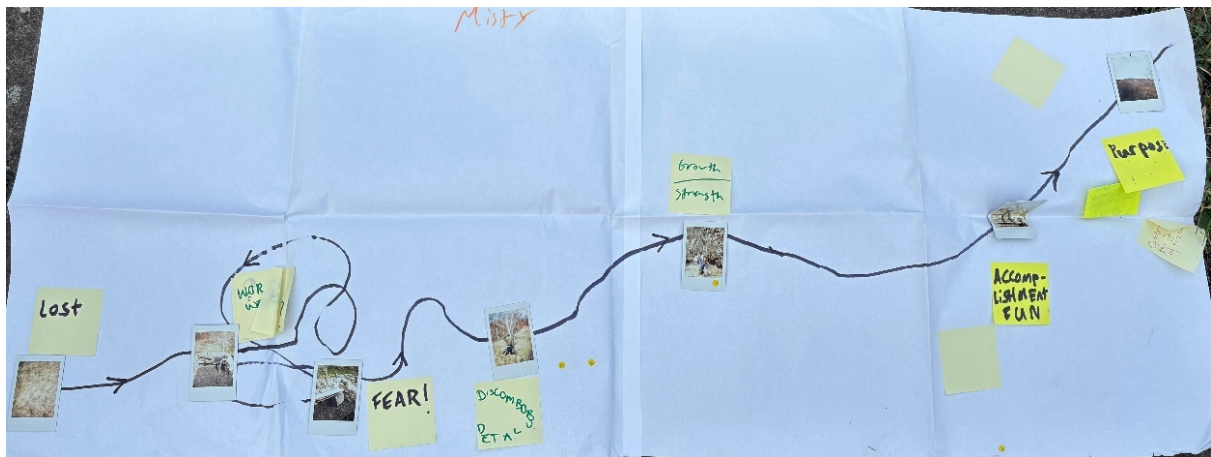
Seeing what could be for you

Joy in life

FUTURE

Finishing the course and getting the job you want

Forestry commission/ shepherding, conservation manager, nature restoration



PAST

Lost

Fear

World weary

Discombobulated

DURING

Growth/ Strength

Accomplishment

Fun

FUTURE

Purpose

Contributing to the future of conservation

Job – tree surgeon, arborist, practical craftsman

These timelines contribute evidence about the change in outlook in terms of anxiety, exclusion and fear before coming into the course changing as a result of the course to many being hopeful, having purpose and either employment or a positive attitude to employment and becoming self-employed.

Past Trainees Timelines (17-21 and 26-30)

The following quotes are collated from individual timelines in order to get a sense of impact on young people's lives when expressing themselves individually. This fits and provides more details that consolidate the positive impact of the rural skills training from the findings from group work.

PAST/ BEFORE

*No idea/ money barrier, bored, further training, optimistic
Lack of confidence in current skills/ reskilling – lost on future pathways
Little knowledge of the industry, lack of confidence
Just wanted to work outside
Very low self-esteem/ practical ability*

COURSE

*Fun, productive, time well spent
Met new people and built trust working with them
Excited and nervous to begin – gaining skills, confidence – can feel overwhelmed by thoughts of future career
Glad to get tickets
Grew in confidence, made new friends, enjoy and understand the course
Still in school - lots of first-hand experience and started to enjoy it more and more*

AFTER

*Continued voluntary skills, immediate use of new skills, house of Bruar, ranger, gardening business, self-employed, more for CV, confidence, ask for advice
Looking forward to future career
Expanding on tickets
Massively improved practical skills and communication in workplace*

NOW

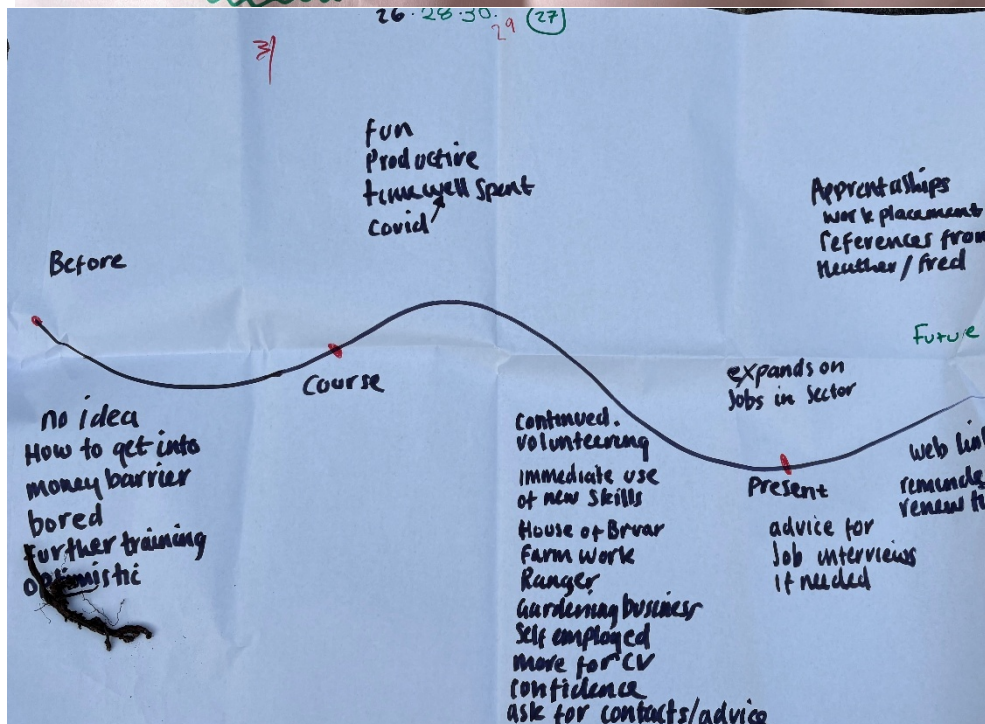
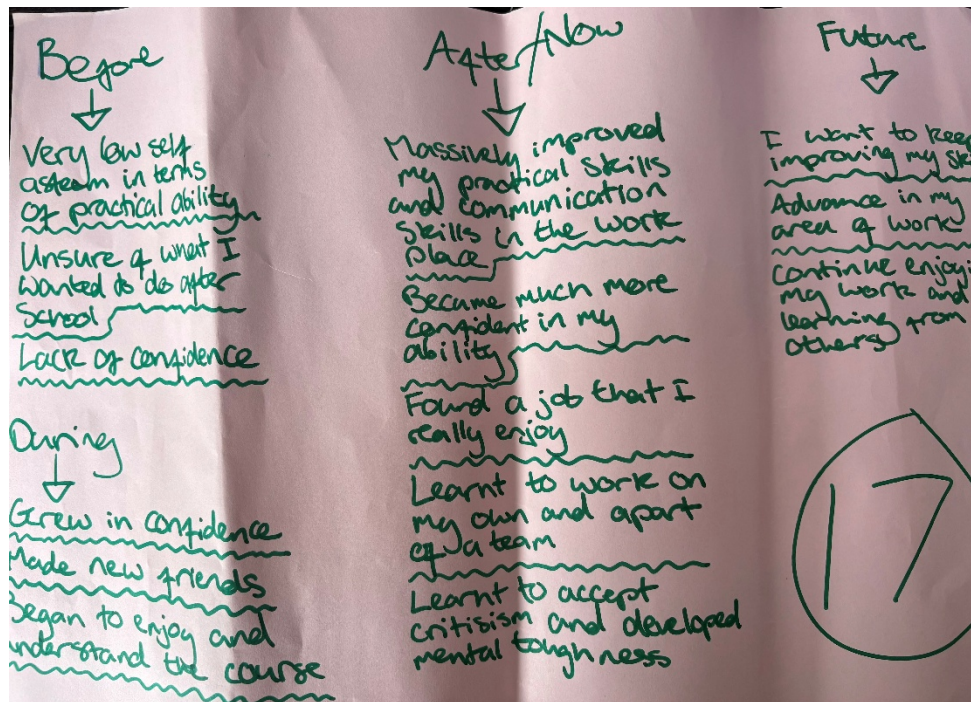
*Expand on job sector, advice for job interviews if needed
Achieved apprenticeship with DC!
Came out with different experiences and joined new farmers, met new people, seeing new sides of rural industry
Found a job I really enjoy, learnt to work on my own and part of a team, learnt to accept criticism and developed mental toughness*

FUTURE

*Apprenticeships, work placements, references from Heather and Fred, reminder to renew tickets, useful weblinks
Continue with rural skills career!
Excited for what is to come in the future and where it leads me
I want to keep improving my skills, enjoying my work and learning from others.*

One of the participants scored all of his feelings and experiences. He started with social skills and work qualifications of 5-6, rising to 7-9 during the course and 8-10 after, with a solid 9-10 for the future! Key highlights for the increase was working with other people, the external trainers and of course Heather and Fred!

Some examples of the individual timelines:

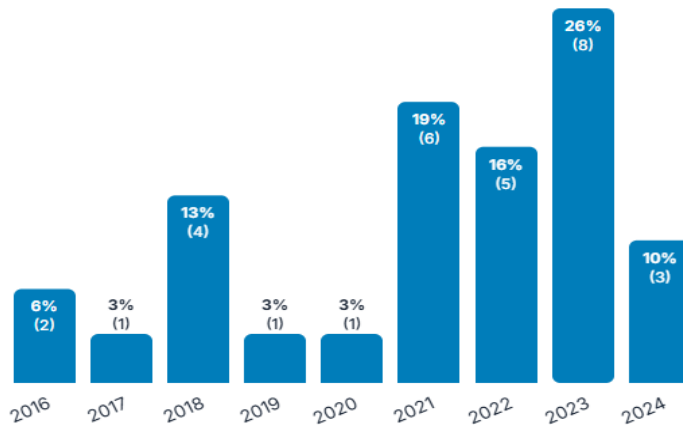


2. Online survey with past trainees

In March 2025, over 70 past trainees were invited to complete a survey about the Dun Coillich training course. The survey was designed to collect information on long-term outcomes from the programme and further insights into trainees' experiences and impressions of the course. The survey questions can be found in an Appendix. The survey was completed by 31 past trainees.

2.1. Characteristics of respondents

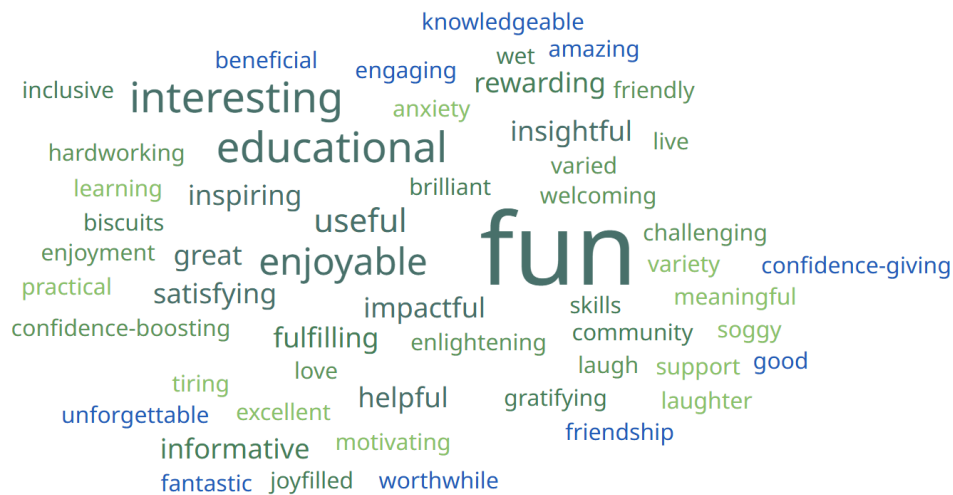
Respondents were trainees on the course across a range of years, with greater representation by recent cohorts (as can be seen in figure below). Respondents' ages (at time of survey) ranged from 17 to 32 years of age. Respondents included 20 people who identified as male, 10 as female and one as non-binary.



Year that survey respondents were enrolled on the Dun Coilich course.

2.2. Trainees' overall experience

Respondents were asked to submit three words that sum up their experience on the course. The most common words included fun, educational, interesting, enjoyable, and useful.

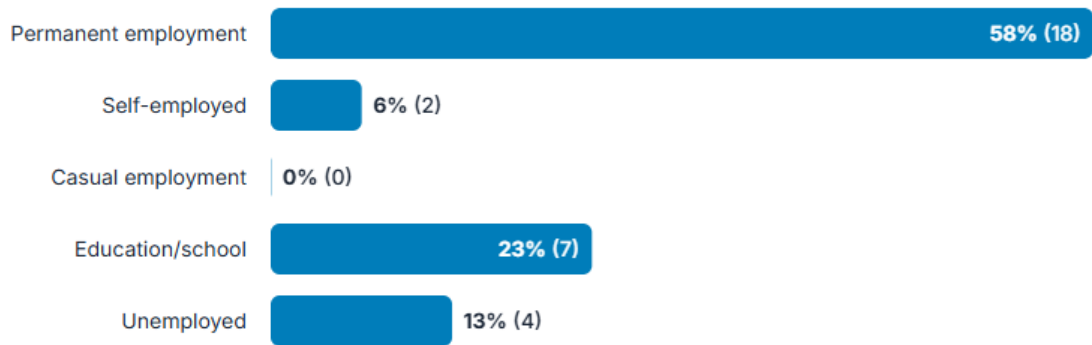


Word cloud showing respondents' 'three words' that best sum up their experience on the course.

2.3. Course Outcomes

➤ **Obtaining permanent employment**

At the time of survey, 27 of the 31 respondents were in permanent employment, self-employment or in education or training (as seen in the figure below). Respondents reported employment across a range of sectors; the most common were forestry and woodland management (9 respondents), gamekeeping and other land management roles (5 respondents), and farm work (4 respondents). Respondents with permanent employment reported working within different capacities, including for private service providers, private estates, third sector organisations, and public sector organisations, including Forestry and Lands Scotland and local councils.



Current employment/education situation among survey respondents

Twenty of the 31 respondents reported that the training course had directly helped them to find employment. Respondents described how the course widened their options for employment and helped them obtain jobs they'd always wanted: "helped me find a brilliant job" / "helped me get a job I've dreamed [of]".

The features of the course that helped respondents obtain employment included the tickets, the practical experience gained, the mentoring support from the trainers, and the networking and connections they had developed. Some respondents also noted that the course had given them confidence when in interviews as they had relevant practical experiences they could draw on, which they felt had a direct impact on being selected for the role. For example, respondents explained,

"Dun Coillich was one of the deciding factors when I was interviewed for my current job. Already having a few tickets/qualifications made a big difference."

"[The course] was invaluable to me as experience I could use for the interview, talking about the skills I'd learned and what I'd like to do more of."

Along with experience, skills, and tickets, the opportunity to develop new connections with people working locally was valued:

"Introducing me to others working in conservation sector locally, so that when a job came up, I already knew the people hiring"

➤ **Increased confidence**

Eighteen respondents specifically noted that the course had improved their confidence levels. This included developing confidence through leadership practice, and more generally through new social and practical skills that also helped with managing everyday life and work situations. Nine of the ten female respondents highlighted the confidence they had developed through the course, and some emphasised how the course enabled them to confidently enter new sectors:

"Confidence to find a job in a sector I knew very little about before the course."

"It gave me much more confidence in being able to continue working in such male dominated industry."

"I had very low confidence in myself, the course helped me reach out and take opportunities and made me realise I was capable of achieving my goals... I became a much stronger leader, and I'm much more self reliant now than I was after I left school."

➤ **Social growth and grounding, improving mental health**

Social outcomes from the course were also highlighted by respondents, including improved mental health. For example, respondents explained:

“The course helped me overcome difficulties with socializing with people and also with being more confident as a person, it also helped me with being more physically active.”

“Helped me socially and mentally during a time where I had just dropped out of school”

“Was really good for my mental health - working on a set task, with others, outdoors in a beautiful place- usually left feeling a lot more upbeat/optimistic/satisfied.”

“Provided a sense of purpose/direction at a difficult time... was really good for my mental health – working on a set task, with others, outdoors in a beautiful place – usually left feeling a lot more upbeat/optimistic/satisfied.”

➤ **Self-realisation and finding new paths**

Respondents explained how the course had opened new career and life paths for them, by introducing them to new opportunities and roles that were enjoyable and feasibly obtainable.

“It made me realise how much I enjoyed working outdoors and how good it is for me personally.”

“Enabled me to see a pathway to a career change into a rural industry, something I previously wished to do but had no idea how to go about.”

“Gave me an idea of what some outdoor jobs would involve, which helped me think about what I wanted to do [and] widened my options in terms of which sorts of jobs I could realistically apply for.”

2.4. Reflections on Course Content

Most useful skills

Respondents were asked to name the three most useful skills they had gained from the course. The opportunity to obtain tickets was highlighted by respondents, confirming responses in other parts of the survey where respondents noted the value of having tickets for obtaining/maintaining employment. Chainsaw and brushcutting tickets were particularly valued.

Respondents also noted the value of a range of ‘soft’ skills, including opportunities to develop social and leadership skills, and some respondents also noted the value of general learning about ecological management: “Less about skills, more about learning all about upland land management.”

Respondents’ reflections on the most useful skills show the value of including diverse offerings within the course that not only provide tickets and specific skills development but also wider opportunities to develop ecological understanding, in addition to team building exercises and leadership practice.

The following table lists the skills that were noted most by respondents as one of their ‘top three’ skills obtained on the course.

Skill	Number of respondents
Chainsaw	15
Brushcutting/strimming	13
Teamwork and social skills	9
All-Terrain Vehicles	8
Fencing	7

General ecological/land management	6
Health/safety (first aid and risk assessments)	5
Drystone dyking	5
Confidence/leadership skills	4
Tree planting	4

What could be improved

Most respondents (18) didn't have any suggestions for improvements, and some used this space instead to reiterate how useful they found the course – “The course was great. I can't think of anything that could have been improved” / “I think the course was great the way it was, having a good all-round quality to it” / “I wouldn't change anything”.

- Additional topics

Most of the suggestions were for additional training topics that could be included in the course, with seven respondents identifying one or more specific skills/training they felt would be useful additions:

- Farming/agricultural topics (4 respondents) – including pesticides training, animal husbandry, horticulture and garden plots, and engaging with farm industry
- Hedge laying and path building (1)
- Woodland management (1)
- Ecology work – habitat surveying/mapping (1)
- Peatland restoration (1)
- More on deer stalking (1)

In addition to these suggestions, respondents also noted some organisational and strategic issues they felt could be improved. These are outlined in the following.

- Smoother communication

Two respondents noted communication challenges during the course, with one suggesting that direct messaging to participants in addition to the group messages could help ensure that sessions are planned at times convenient for all. One respondent also suggested that the paperwork involved could be reduced.

- More networking opportunities

Two respondents suggested there could be further opportunities for networking and building connections with local organisations, including local forestry professionals.

- Further time for practice

One respondent noted that additional time to practice new skills would be beneficial. This issue was also raised in the group workshops, as noted elsewhere in this report. As the training programme has been recently extended, trainees' perspectives on the time allotted for practice should be re-assessed with current trainees to see if further adjustments need to be made.

- Towards an inclusive strategic outlook

One respondent felt that the Trustee's outlook could be more inclusive to ensure that all trainees feel equally welcome and supported, including people who may not be from the region. This respondent also suggested that at the strategic planning level there could be more consideration of neurodiversity and the invisibility of the different challenges people may face, which would help to create a more inclusive programme for women, non-binary and neurodiverse people.

In the group workshops, participants also suggested that access could be widened to include people from other regions, as discussed above. The Trustees could consider how the course is communicated and how trainees are recruited to benefit a wider range of people with different backgrounds, education levels, and identities.

2.5. Trainees' future plans

Eighteen respondents described future plans that involved applying skills they had obtained or developed further in the course, including roles in forestry, conservation, gamekeeping, and farming.

"I'm definitely going to stick around in the conservation sector and see myself in my current job for the next few years as it's giving me lots of opportunities to learn about woodland management."

"I want to move towards being fully self-employed. The course was essential to me because I live in a rural area and make use of chainsaws, brush cutters, axes and other general outdoor maintenance very regularly."

3. HPCLT team and trustees

The HPCLT project leader and trustee on the evaluation team first participated in an evaluation H and then also participated with the project assistant and two more trustees. The following summary arises from these two sessions.

What's worked	Constructive criticism
Initial vision being realised	Can be hard balancing paid work with training for trainees
Teamwork – Heather and Fred	Capacity for delivery
Practical skills offered to trainees	Trustees are volunteers so can feel like a 'big ask'
Positive outcomes for young people	Having to raise money/ get enough resources
<i>"Enjoy seeing young people shine"</i>	More communication of training and outcomes but balance with keeping authenticity
Increasing confidence of young people	
Trust and strong bonds are made during training	
Employment for young people	
Safeguarding framework developed	
Good links with community	
Respect for local needs	
Good optics, improved communication and website	
Engaged trustees	
Responded to evaluation from trainees and also to covid	
Changing attitudes to young people	
Assistant Project Officer has made a massive difference	

Actions

- Improved mechanisms for staying in touch
- Young people staying in touch (WhatsApp)
- Review transport/ insurance/ dial a bus? Access to minibus?
- Celebrate what we do while staying genuine
- Communicate whilst not growing too big and losing authenticity
- Navigate conflicts
- Asking for and planning support for delivery team
- Linking budgets to outcomes
- Sub-committee on funding (CLARIFY ALREADY OR NEED THIS?)
- Communicate outcomes on young people's futures and ongoing evaluation
- Ensure more/ all trustees see what is happening on the ground/ ask Trustees to BBQs/ let young people know about trustees/ balance as unpaid
- Find out more about impact on employees
- Succession planning – what if we lose Heather!

Verification and Action Planning at AGM

Priorities for action

Throughout the research, participants suggested ideas that would improve the rural skills training courses. Previous cohorts often suggested action that had already been taken by HPCLT so the response to actions from the HPCLT team are included in the accompanying tables.

The tables of 'Recommended Actions' displayed on the following page shows the level of participant support for the actions identified in this research.

They fall in the following themes:

- Communication and networking
- Course organisation
- Course content

Action Charts developed at Annual General Meeting

Green: selected by 8+ participants; Blue: selected by 5 - 7 participants

Theme: Communication/networking

Action	Priority level (AGM participants)	Comments from HPCLT
Communicate outcomes locally through contacts	4 community stakeholders 4 Trustees	Use new website and social media as tools for this Produce postcard of research and share evaluation report, and use of toolkit for ongoing evaluation that can be communicated
Increase contact and input from employers	5 community stakeholders 3 trustees	New trustee recently recruited with skills, experience and contacts with local businesses Further work could be developed here
Networking with other similar training programmes	3 community stakeholders 2 Trustee	Well-networked with other restoration trusts, but engagement is limited by capacity and currently unaware of similar training programmes Interesting feedback from trainees that they would like to connect with other programmes – further work needed to look into how to make this happen
Ongoing communication with past trainees, for example, reminders for renewing tickets, info on other opportunities	4 community stakeholders 1 Trustee	Toolkit developed in this research will help with this
Conduct follow-up surveys with past trainees for long-term outcomes	2 community stakeholders 3 Trustees	Toolkit provides process for this
Ex-trainees acting as buddy or mentor for new trainees [new action added]	2 Trustees	The apprentices are acting in this capacity, but this could be expanded further, such as by having overlapping courses

Create a signposting service (website or paper-based) for trainees by topic – with links to online training materials and info about other opportunities	1 community stakeholder	This would be a good resource to develop
Communicate outcomes of the programme widely online	1 community stakeholder	This has already started with a new website and social media, and this research project
Keeping a local, networked focus to communications and marketing to ensure authenticity	1 community stakeholder	This could be expanded on further to develop stronger links with local communities
More marketing of the programme online	0	This has also started with the website and social media, but could be expanded on

Theme: Course organisation

Action	Priority level (AGM participants)	Comments
Include background reading and links to online materials – foundational info and more specialised info on course topics	7 community stakeholders 5 Trustees	This would require further capacity to develop but would be good to do
Review transport: access to minibus / establish regular pick up points	4 community stakeholders 4 Trustees 1 past trainee	This is constantly under review, and an identified barrier

Establish toolkits and training guidance (also to be ready for succession planning)	4 community stakeholders 1 Trustee 1 Trainee	This project has developed the toolkit for evaluation, but a toolkit for the training programme would be important to develop
Widen access - open the course to people in other regions	3 community stakeholders	There is a capacity issue for this, but tentatively exploring through Perth and Kinross Council
Plan and fund resources for back-up activities (in case of bad weather or no-show of trainer) such as indoor building projects, ecological training	3 community stakeholders	This has already increased more recently, but further resources could be developed for this
Create a more flexible schedule with opportunities to make-up missed sessions	1 community stakeholder	Efforts have been taken to increase flexibility where possible, but commitment to certain days is expected
Involve trainees more in selecting times of days	1 community stakeholder	Due to staff capacity this would be difficult
Subsidise travel for trainees coming from further away	1 community stakeholder	Potentially, this could be offered. Lifts are already offered from Dunkeld, Pitlochry and Aberfeldy and this would be challenging because of resources.
Prioritise age and gender diversity within each cohort (registration selection)	0	Up until now, most applicants have been accepted on the programme, so there has been little potential to influence the balance, but this could be considered in the future

Theme: Course content

Action	Priority level (AGM participants)	Comments
Include more support with job advice and job applications	5 community stakeholders 3 trustees	There is already a lot of work underway on this, but could be developed further
Include training in ecological management and ecological topics	6 Community stakeholders 2 Trainees	This has been included when there has been interested, but this could be developed further, especially in relation to biodiversity
Include training in tool maintenance	2 community stakeholders 2 Trustees	Training in tool maintenance is included
Include training in mapping/GIS	1 community stakeholder 3 Trustees	When there is interest, we already include mapping, but could expand this to also include GIS
Include farming topics	1 community stakeholder 2 Trustees	This could be developed further with current apprenticeship partners
Include training in project management and how to become self-employed	2 community stakeholders	This is included informally on a one-to-one basis, but could be expanded on and added as a formal session
Include visits to other regions	2 community stakeholders	This could be something for the future
Add more tickets and accredited qualifications	0	It would be difficult to fit more within the timeframe of this course, so this would need to be looked in relation to extending the programme The apprenticeships offer this

Other ideas of comments:

“Training volunteers (Tuesday/Sunday) - don’t miss out on the vast amount of informal training that takes place in these groups”

➔ Further research being considered to address this

Conclusion

This evaluation confirmed the value of the ongoing monitoring and evaluation carried out by HPCLT and the iterative nature of the rural skills training course in responding to the views of young participants on the course.

Young people in past and present cohorts said that the course was fun and invaluable in providing skills training with certificates recognised by employers. They valued their increased social skills, learning to work individually and as part of a team, and the course had given many of them hope in terms of careers and sustainable livelihoods in rural areas. The age and gender mix in cohorts was appreciated when this had been possible.

There were tweaks suggested in the evaluation, such as more on ecological management, farming, mapping and project management/ self-employment skills, and some wanting additional online resources, but on the whole the rural skills training responds to these issues raised by young people through the ongoing evaluative and inclusive processes.

The rural skills training has had a profound effect on young people's lives, evidenced by their group and individual timelines carried out in the evaluation. Many who felt lost and disillusioned with education and employment prospects have ended up in employment or as self employed with increased confidence and purpose in their lives and futures. The progression of trainees to become apprentices (two at present) has been successful in terms of supporting delivery and career progression.

There were suggestions about increasing the visibility of what is available for young people and what HPCLT has achieved although to some extent this is addressed by the development of the new HPCLT website. Advertising/signposting would increase numbers but would need to be done with capacity to deliver the course in mind.

Many remarked on the success of the programme being down to the facilitation by the programme leader and assistant. Whilst this is entirely commendable, it also suggests the importance of having more documentation of how the course is delivered for succession planning. The development of resources through this project, including the toolkit for ongoing monitoring and evaluation will help in succession planning.

Support from the trustees and from community stakeholders has been important. This positive evaluation can help to confirm to them and funders (current and potential) the value of the course. The rural skills training benefits the community and region in providing skills training that transforms the lives of otherwise potentially marginalised and out of work young people who may otherwise also leave the rural areas or remain unskilled. The evaluation has also provided evidence

about the positive impact the course has had on the livelihoods and outlook of local young people.

A suggestion from adults currently volunteering is that they also benefit from their engagement with HPCLT and some would like to contribute more. Another issue raised by young people and adults was the poor rural transport. Although this is managed well by programme leaders it is also a continual barrier to further expansion and relies on the good will of staff to continue the pick-up of participants. Extending the course in terms of numbers, region and scope is tempting but there is caution about maintaining the excellent quality of the course and keeping it manageable and sustainable. Strategies in the longer term for reaching out to more young people could be considered if there is adequate time and training of more apprentices and project managers/ assistants in the future. There may also be scope to extend experiences for young people to learning about other initiatives in other regions.

APPENDIX 1

Participant Information Sheet

Study title: Dun Coilich Rural Skills Training Project Evaluation & Social Impact Assessment

Invitation and brief summary

You are invited to take part in a study about the Highland Perthshire Communities Land Trust (HPCLT) rural skills training programme. The research will develop evaluation tools and stakeholder engagement tools that can inform the ongoing development of the training programme.

Your decision to take part in the research is voluntary and has no impact on your relationship with HPCLT, your eligibility for training or your employment.

What will taking part involve?

The research will involve group sessions, individual interviews, and/or an online survey with people connected to HPCLT as current or past participants in the training programme or as local employers. You will be asked to share your ideas about the programme's outcomes, how the programme can be improved, and how it can be best evaluated and/or keep abreast with training needs in the region. The session may involve visual tools, such as posterboards and sticky notes. The researchers will help you to share your ideas, and you can choose which activities you want to take part in.

The researchers may want to record the session as it can be difficult to remember all the details. If so, you will be told before the session starts and all participants will be asked if they agree to the recording. If you prefer no recording, please let the researchers know and they can take notes instead.

What are the benefits of taking part?

By taking part, you can share your views and help to improve the way things are done at HPCLT.

Are there any risks?

There are no known risks to your health or safety. The researchers understand that sometimes discussing employment situations can be stressful. They will provide support, including resources that can be accessed.

What if I want to stop?

You can stop participating at any time. You do not need to give a reason, and you can also choose not to answer specific questions or ask the researcher to talk about something else.

What will happen to the results of this study?

The findings will be used to create tools that can be used by HPCLT to evaluate the programme and obtain stakeholder input. We may also use the findings in reports and/or academic papers.

How will my information be protected?

You will be given a unique reference number, and your name won't appear in any reports or outputs. If anything you say is used in the study, it will not include personal details. The researchers may take photos at an activity, but only if all participants agree. If you would prefer to not have photos taken, please let the researchers know.

What data will be stored about me and for how long?

The research data will be stored securely for an initial period of 5 years in the University's password-protected folders. You can ask for all your data to be removed from the study until [date tbc] when it will be used in reports or other outputs.

Contact details

If you have any questions about the study or want further information, please don't hesitate to contact Sarah Wagner at sarah.wagner.ic@uhi.ac.uk. You can also contact the Director of the Centre for Living Sustainability, Prof Vicky Johnson at vicky.johnson.ic@uhi.ac.uk.

Further information about data protection

Identity of the Data Controller and Data Protection Officer

The data controller is the University of the Highlands and Islands, UHI House, Old Perth Road, Inverness, IV2 3JH. The Data Protection Officer can be contacted at: dataprotectionofficer@uhi.ac.uk.

Lawful basis for processing personal data:

The lawful basis for processing personal data is outlined in the UK General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) Article 6 1 (e):

Processing is necessary for the performance a task carried out in the public interest or under official authority vested in us (the Controller). In this case, the undertaking of research by the University or its students in keeping with the University's official role. This includes the planning, delivery, and communication of research. Research includes conducting the research and the taking all required steps to ensure the safety, validity and academic integrity of the research. It may also include re-use of the research data for further research, storage for later inspection, auditing and archiving.

Your data will or may be shared with the following recipients or categories of recipients:

The data that personally identifies you will be tightly controlled and only shared with others on a need-to-know-basis. However, all other research outputs may be shared internally within the university for the purpose of academic integrity, safety and safeguarding, marking, audit, records management, library, archiving, and quality assurance purposes (and to ensure all data is handled, and research conducted, in keeping with UHI's policies and procedures).

Data may be processed by UHI, UHI Inverness staff e.g. ICT staff who are required to undertake actions to keep the data safe, maintain data integrity, or ensure the data is handled and secured in keeping with UHI's data policies and procedures. The parties may include UHI staff, contractors or selected external individuals. Such access will only be used as necessary.

For any questions about data sharing please contact the principal investigator listed in this document.

Retention

Your data will be retained for an initial period of 5 years in University of the Highlands and Islands password protected folders. This retention period does not apply to any materials published as a result of this project. You can withdraw all information collected about you up until the date provided in this form when the data will be used to develop reports.

Rights of data subjects

- The right to access your personal data
- The right to rectification if the personal data we hold about you is incorrect
- The right to restrict processing of your personal data

The following rights apply only in certain circumstances:

- The right to withdraw consent at any time if consent is our lawful basis for processing your data
- The right to object to our processing of your personal data
- The right to request erasure (deletion) of your personal data
- The right to data portability

If you wish to exercise your information rights or have concerns about the way your data is being processed, you can write to the local Data Controller (see above).

- If you are not satisfied with our response, you may raise a complaint via the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO). The ICO is the UK's independent body set up to uphold information rights.

APPENDIX 2 RESEARCH CONSENT FORM

Title of Project: Dun Coillich Rural Skills Training Project Evaluation & Social Impact Assessment

Please initial box

1. I confirm that I have read the information sheet dated 20 January (version 1.1) for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.

2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason, without legal rights being affected.

3. I understand that if the research session is to be recorded all participants will be informed in advance and will agree to the recording before the start of the activity.

4. I understand that photos of the research activity will be taken only if all participants agree and that no identifying photos of me will be shared unless I have reviewed them and decide to provide my consent for sharing in a photo permissions form.

5. I understand that I can have all of my previously collected information withdrawn up until [date to be added] when the data will be analysed and collated into reports.

6. I understand that the information I provide will be used to inform evaluation and stakeholder engagement tools for Highland Perthshire Communities Land Trust and may be used for academic reports, papers and presentations.

I agree to take part in the study as outlined above.

Name of Participant

Date

Signature

Name of person taking consent

Date

Signature

APPENDIX 3
Online Survey

Gender:

- Female
- Male
- Non-binary
- Prefer not to say
- Other

Age:

In what year did you take the rural skills training course?

- 2016
- 2017
- 2018
- 2019
- 2020
- 2021
- 2022
- 2023
- 2024

What best describes your current situation?

- Permanent employment
- Self-employed
- Casual employment
- Education/school
- Unemployed

What have you been up to since the Dun Coilich course? (please list any employment, training, etc.)

Did the course help you find employment or access further education or training? If so, in what way?

What three words sum up your experience of the course?

Can you list the three most useful skills you learnt in the course?

Can you list three ways in which the course helped you (if at all)?

What was missing from the course or what could have been done differently?

What are your plans for the future? Are there any links with the course?