



EVALUATION OF UKCRF OLDHAM

January 2023

Authors: Susan Baines and Katri-Liis Lepik
Contact s.baines@mmu.ac.uk

PERU Policy Evaluation
& Research Unit

Key Messages

Roots of Opportunity was one of eight successful Greater Manchester-based bids to the UK Community Renewal Fund (UKCRF). It stands out from the other seven projects in spanning all four of the UKCRF priorities, investing in skills, supporting people into employment, investment for local businesses, and Community and place (including green spaces and culture-led regeneration). Unlike any other UKCRF project in Greater Manchester, all the activities of Roots of Opportunity were centred upon one location, the 160 acre urban green space situated 10 minutes walk from the town centre. This enabled the project to take a strategic approach to maximising place-based outcomes.

Roots of Opportunity delivered on its promise to enable young people to contribute to the local environment and learn about employment in the green economy. It did this through a strand called **Green Steps** with a series of ‘micro-placements’ for Year 10 pupils. Just over 100 pupils participated which was slightly below the target although schools had booked places for 260.

The ‘micro placements’ for pupils proved to be a model that could be replicated to enable many more young people to contribute to the environment and learn about work in the green economy. The two-day placement length seems to represent a viable compromise between richness of work experience and the very limited availability of time within the school curriculum.

The achievement of Green Steps depended almost entirely on engaging schools. Its offer to schools was highly attractive as a relatively low-effort route for them to deliver on their statutory requirements on careers and work experience. There is clearly an appetite for this kind of opportunity. Five-day mini placements for young people identified as not in education employment or training (NEET) were less successful and it was difficult find young people to take up the places. It is possible that a five-day mini placement in environmental work at Northern Roots could be a valuable optional stream to consider for young people across Greater Manchester receiving intensive, longer-term support to move towards economic activity.

The national social enterprise **Skill Mill** provided an intensive work experience and training programme in outdoor work. The Skill Mill model for young people who have been in the criminal justice system has been successful across England in securing qualifications and employment, and reducing re-offending. There were modifications for the Oldham site. Young people from local authority care were included as well as young people in the justice system. All the Skill Mill work experience took place on the greenspace and there were no external employers. This was a practical advantage in enabling a timely start (in contrast to another UKCRF funded Skill Mill site). There was a very wide variety of environmental tasks for the young people to experience and they also encountered arts and culture and learned about self-employment, thanks to the other UKCRF funded activities. The absence of work that can be charged for, however, leaves questions about sustainability. Only four young people out of eight completed the programme which is lower than Skill Mill typically achieves. Nevertheless, the Youth Justice service appreciates the opportunity and has followed up with a second cohort (still in progress at the time of writing).

The UKCRF priority ‘communities and place’ was realised through opportunities for both culture-led regeneration and environmental improvement. Work for local businesses **Taking Root** took the form of supporting fledgling entrepreneurs offering environmental and/or cultural services on the greenspace. The start-up businesses achieved visibility and successfully involved visitors and volunteers in creative ways, contributing to the environmental and - to a lesser extent - the cultural goals of Roots of Opportunity. However, with hindsight the idea of incubating new business enterprises that would become economically sustainable for individuals with little experience in a few months was overly optimistic.

The Northern Sky strand originally planned three public-facing art and cultural events on the Northern Roots site. Four were delivered between May and September 2022. Each was quite different but had in common the championing of artists and practitioners from diverse backgrounds, increasing collaboration, and testing what audiences respond to. The events formed only part of a wider programme for arts and culture not within the UKCRF funding. They were well attended and contribute to building up 'more and better success stories', as called for in Oldham's cultural strategy. UKCRF funding also enabled the preparation of a *Northern Roots Arts & Culture Strategy* as a guide to outcomes, values, target audiences and ways to encourage visitors to engage with the site.

Eight UKCRF funded projects were in progress across greater Manchester at the same time. One tackled the green economy (in Manchester only) and two worked throughout the city region with target groups included within Roots of Opportunity - NEET young people and small business owners. Positive steps tried to research out to GMCA with regard to opportunities for NEET young people. Overall, however, there was limited interaction with other UKCRF projects. This looks like a missed opportunity for mutually beneficial co-operation and learning but was probably inevitable due to the very tight timescales that affected the whole of the UKCRF programme.

An important factor in making the achievements of Roots of Opportunity sustainable is the need to look at available funding streams. Oldham has just been successful in winning competitive Levelling Up funding from central government for three eco-friendly projects including Northern Roots' learning centre to provide training linked to green and sustainable skills. There is still work to do taking proactive measures to secure future funding and develop a sustainable business model. The programme's only national partner Skill Mill has been successful across the country in gaining resources to pursue its social mission from an unusual combination of public sector, philanthropic and commercial funding. These include charged-for environmental services and outcomes contracts with up front finance from social investors. They are not a panacea but options to explore in the context of a diverse mixed economy for funding new social, community and environmental programmes.

Table of Contents

| | |
|--|----|
| Key Messages..... | i |
| 1 Introduction | 1 |
| 2. Background | 2 |
| 2.1 The Community Renewal Fund (national) | 2 |
| 2.2 The Community Renewal fund in Greater Manchester | 2 |
| 3.1 Green Steps | 5 |
| 3.2 Skill Mill - Intensive Support | 9 |
| 3.3 Arts and cultural strategy..... | 11 |
| 3.4 Taking Root Ventures: Business support | 13 |
| 4.1 Overall delivery | 15 |
| 4.2 Overall impact and futures | 16 |
| 5 Conclusions and lessons learned | 17 |

1 Introduction

Roots of Opportunity was funded by the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities as part of the £220 million UK Community Renewal Fund (UKCRF). Through a unique partnership, Roots of Opportunity addressed all four of the CRF priorities, skills, employment, business development and 'communities & place' (including the green economy and creative arts). It was located on 160 acres urban greenspace around ten minutes walk from Oldham town centre.

Roots of Opportunity brought young people to the greenspace and guided them to contribute to the local environment and learn about employment in the green economy, aligned with the UK's net zero and environmental objectives. The project also reached out to the wider community. Business support and an arts and culture programme aimed to benefit and inspire residents and contribute to a new asset for the borough.

The partners were three very different organisations, Positive Steps the Skill Mill and Northern Roots.

Positive Steps led the partnership. It is a charitable trust with over 15 years' experience of providing support services for families, young people and adults in Oldham, Rochdale and Thameside. In Oldham it is the provider of the Youth Justice services, work experience placements, careers guidance, support for Young Carers, and Family Support (help for families who have difficulties such as housing, money, parenting, or health).

Northern Roots is a recently registered charity initiated by Oldham Council with a mission to transform the greenspace mostly owned by the council into the UK's largest urban farm and eco-park as a destination for learning, leisure and growing. Northern Roots' core objectives are to generate social, economic and environmental benefits for local residents and communities.

The Skill Mill is a social enterprise providing environmental employment opportunities for young people who have experienced criminal justice. It has a strong track record of reducing reoffending whilst increasing young people's employability. Since its foundation in Newcastle upon Tyne in 2013, Skill Mill and has expanded across England but had not previously worked in Oldham.

This was a new partnership that came together to bid for the CRF project. Positive Steps connected Skill Mill (through its youth justice networks) with the locally based Northern Roots. Each partner had its own objectives, ambitions, target groups, and geographic coverage but they were nevertheless able to sign up to the common goals of Roots of Opportunity in Oldham.

UKCRF was for 2022 only. Its remit was testing and trialling new ideas with a view to informing the domestic successor to EU structural funds. This implies evaluation and learning. Evaluation was required of all CRF funded projects. This report is the output of evaluation. It covers the implementation and short-term outcomes (for example qualifications gained, communities engaged with, businesses supported) of Roots of Opportunity with particular attention to what worked well and what worked less well, and drawing lessons applicable locally and nationally. At the time of writing (only a month after the end of the project) it is not possible to determine longer term outcomes mentioned in the bid to UKCRF such as improved employment prospects for local communities, attracting visitors and investors to the borough, and greenspace enhanced in a financially sustainable way. However, there are indications of being on track to achieve them through success in securing new funding.



Figure 1 - Green space, work experience and culture (building a willow hoop for an arts project)

2. Background

2.1 The Community Renewal Fund (national)

The UK Community Renewal Fund (UKCRF) was launched in May 2021 to level up opportunities for individuals, communities, and businesses. UKCRF aimed to help people and communities most in need and provide opportunities for councils to address their own local issues and promote collaborative working. The fund was also intended to inform the new 'UK Shared Prosperity Fund', which replaces European funding. UKCRF had four priorities:

- Investing in skills (including work-based training, retraining, upskilling, and reskilling)
- Supporting people into employment
- Community and place (including green spaces and culture-led regeneration)
- Investment for local businesses

Interventions supported by UKCRF were also expected to contribute to the UK Government's Net Zero ambitions and support green growth (but this did not apply to those focused on supporting people into employment). UKCRF was innovative in nature with a short duration. The application process was light touch compared to the EU-funded counterparts the European Social Fund (ESF) and the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF). Any legally constituted organisation could bid but all bids were required to go through a lead authority as part of the competitive process.

2.2 The Community Renewal fund in Greater Manchester

Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA) led for Greater Manchester with responsibility for prioritising, shortlisting and submitting bids. The borough of Oldham (along with Bolton, Manchester, and Rochdale) was a priority place. GMCA did not submit bids itself but worked with bidders to strengthen their chances of success through on-line engagement sessions and FAQs,

although time constraints precluded one-to-one support. Drawing on extensive experience of programmes such as ERDF, GMCA was very successful in streamlining the application process with the use of an online procurement portal.¹

Roots of Opportunity was one of eight successful Greater Manchester-based UKCRF bids. This was out of a total of 76 bids received by GMCA, the highest number of any lead authority². It shortlisted 27 for submission to UKCRF following appraisal. Six of the successful bids focused wholly or mainly on the national priority of supporting people into employment, targeting vulnerable and excluded groups which was a Greater Manchester priority. Roots of Opportunity stands out among the eight GM-based projects in spanning all of the four national UKCRF proprieties. Only one other project funded in Greater Manchester (the Green Economy Employment Partnership) addressed ‘people & communities’ in relation to the green economy, which it did through a green skills programme for unemployed Manchester residents. More generally across the country, many places found the projects that won funding focused on one priority only.³

Table 1: Greater Manchester projects funded by UKCRF

| Project | CRF Priorities | Target group/s | Location |
|--|--|---|--|
| Breaking Digital – Barriers Good Things Foundation - | Skills; people into Employment | People without access to digital skills | Greater Manchester |
| Green Economy Employment Partnership One Manchester - | Communities & place (green spaces); People into Employment; Skills | Unemployed and either a lone parent, NEET, disabled, over 50, or racially minoritised | Manchester city council area only |
| Greater Manchester's Hidden Talent GMCVO | People into Employment | NEET young people especially ‘hidden’ (not claiming benefits) | Greater Manchester |
| New Pioneers Programme Rochdale Boroughwide Housing | People into Employment; Skills | Residents out of work, or in insecure or part-time work | Rochdale |
| Roots of Opportunity Positive Steps - | People into Employment; Skills; local businesses; Communities & place (green spaces and culture-led regeneration) | Vulnerable young people; NEET young people; Year 10 pupils; new small businesses; all residents | Oldham |
| Start Up Vision Growth Company - | Local businesses | Small business owners | GM wide (priority Rochdale, Bolton & Oldham) |
| The Good Jobs Project Growth Company - | People into Employment; Skills | All GM residents and those with right to work and right to remain status | GM wide (north Manchester-based) |
| TRANSFORM Inspired Associates | People into Employment; Skills | Unemployed, economically inactive or underemployed | Greater Manchester |

¹ Local Government Association (2022a) *Learning from the Community Renewal Fund Programme*
<https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/learning-community-renewal-fund-programme>

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

Although GMCA shortlisted some national organisations for UKCRF funding their bids were overall less successful⁴. The Roots of Opportunity partnership comprised two local partners (Positive Steps and Northern Roots) plus a national organisation - Skill Mill. Skill Mill is headquartered in the northeast of England and currently works with local authorities all across the country including just one (Rochdale) in Greater Manchester. Skill Mill also won UKCRF support in two other local authority sites, Norfolk County Council and North Northamptonshire Unitary Council. Unlike Roots of Opportunity these were stand-alone projects to deliver an intensive intervention for vulnerable young people.

3 The Roots of Opportunity Programme

Positive Step's bid to UKCRF opened the project summary with the words, **"We will pilot a programme with a graduated approach to enable young people to contribute to the local environment and seek employment in the green economy."** Unlike any other UKCRF project in greater Manchester, all the activities of Roots of Opportunity were centred upon one specific location, the urban green space. The space encompasses flat grass land, heath, boggy wetlands and dense wooded slopes. Northern Roots intend the site to contribute to Oldham Council's aspiration to achieve carbon neutrality by 2030. It also aligns with Greater Manchester's Five Year Environment Plan to mitigate climate change. As mentioned above, Roots of Opportunity was exceptionally ambitious in applying to the fund to address each of the four national UKCRF priorities - supporting people into employment; skills; communities and place; and local businesses

The CRF priority 'people into employment' was undertaken in Roots of Opportunity through an intensive work experience and training programme for young people who had been in the criminal justice system or local authority care. These vulnerable participants gained new skills in environmental work. A much wider group of young people – over 100 pupils from local schools - also gained practical experience of work in green jobs, thus delivering on the priority for skills (through work-based training). 'Communities and place' was realised through opportunities for both culture-led regeneration and green spaces. Work for local businesses took the form of supporting start-up entrepreneurs. The programme had four separate, but interlinked, strands as illustrated in Figure 2.

After a rather delayed competitive bidding processes, successful applications to UKCRF were announced in November 2021 with the intention that they would commence in January 2022 and complete by the end of June 2022. This was an extremely testing time scale.

Roots of Opportunity managed to commence in January with micro-placements for school children and a cohort of young people embarking on the intensive support provided by Skill Mill. The partners achieved this despite the hectic timing and the fact that (contrary to earlier assumptions) the start was in mid-winter. The other strands in Roots of Opportunity commenced in spring.

The micro-placements were completed in the summer of 2022 according to the original schedule. The timeline was extended – as it was for other CRF projects facing similar challenges. Roots of Opportunity came to a conclusion at the end of December 2022.

⁴ Local Government Association (2022b) *Greater Manchester Combined Authority Community Renewal Fund Programme* <https://www.local.gov.uk/case-studies/greater-manchester-combined-authority-community-renewal-fund-programme>

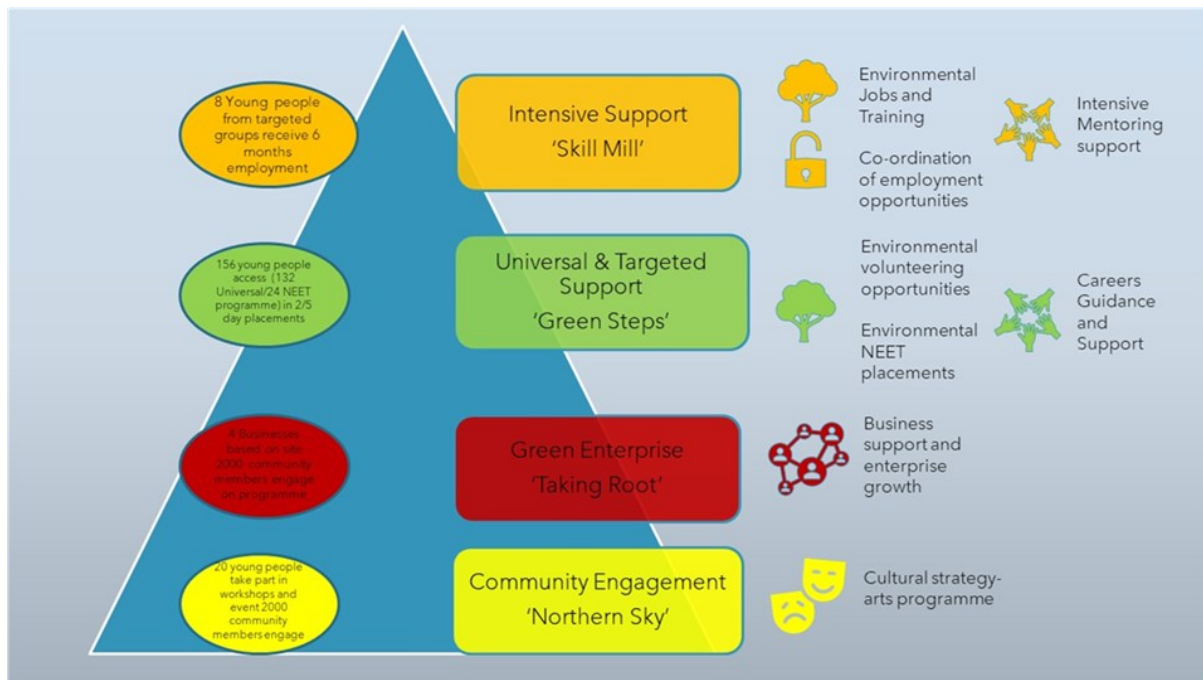


Figure 2 The four strands of Roots of Opportunity

3.1 Green Steps

The government has declared an ambition for two million green jobs in the UK by 2030 and one of the key recommendations of the Green Jobs Taskforce (2021) is that industry, the education sector, and government should work together to ensure an offer of green careers advice and pathways⁵. Green Steps aimed to connect young people to jobs in the green economy by offering environmental volunteering experiences. It comprised a blended model of work-experience and work-readiness combined with environmental conservation actions and an AQA qualification. Most participants were Year 10 pupils engaged via local schools. There was also a subgroup of young people not in education employment or training (NEET) or at risk of becoming NEET. Green Steps had a slow start in January 2022 but an intensive effort with schools paid off. Despite practical challenges and some frustrations, it achieved commendable results and positive feedback. The implementation and outcomes are described in more detail below

3.1.1. Implementation of Green Steps

Positive Steps was very well positioned to deliver Green Steps. They have over 15 years' experience of working with schools and colleges to provide work experience placements for young people in Oldham (as well as the boroughs of Rochdale, Tameside, Stockport and Manchester, and more recently across Greater Manchester). The young people undertook short placements known as 'micro placements' in the green economy with mentoring and individual action plans for progression into training and employment. Placements for school pupils were two days long and for NEET young people five days. Sessions were for ten young people, organised by site-based project workers known as 'rangers'.

⁵ <https://www.hiesscheme.org.uk/2021/09/06/summary-of-the-green-jobs-taskforce-report/>

The robins would come and visit and stuff as we were working. They [young people] would ask questions about the wildlife.I would say most individuals loved it – if the weather was right (Ranger)

The placements began with staff chatting about careers and green jobs and talking to the visitors about the site to get them enthused. Then they undertook risk assessments and supplied safety equipment. Rangers organised the tasks. A litter pick was often used as a warm-up. Other activities varied according to season and what was going on. There were normally three different activities per session. These could include work on the organic vegetable patch, thinning the woodland, dead hedging, or filling up the bird feeders. One group had the opportunity to join a drumming workshop- connecting the green activities to the site’s cultural experiences. For the five-day sessions there was more depth and sometimes the opportunity to see activities through.

When the project started in January 2022 there was no shelter available on site. The project staff were resourceful in gaining access to a local cricket club but it was some distance from the site and as a result the outdoor experience was affected by bad weather.



Figure 3 Year 10 pupils preparing ground for food production

The short time-scale of the placement presented a challenge for the AQA element. AQAs with a green element are often over a period of time but a suitable one was found.

Initially the project struggled to get schools on board. This could have been at least partly due to the timing. As an outdoor project Green Steps was impacted by having to commence in January contrary to expectations when it had been initially planned. By the end of January 2022 only two school groups (Y10) had taken part and low number accessing the project through schools was formally logged as a risk. Between February and June 2022 there was intensive effort to contact and involve schools and the situation was quickly turned around. As a project worker reported, “I thought I would have to sell it but schools were very interested”. The AQA element was a selling point for schools. Another reason schools were so receptive was that it helped them to meet their statutory obligations to provide career guidance and encounters with employers. In particular, it was an opportunity to deliver on Benchmark 6 of the internationally recognised Gatsby career Benchmarks ‘Experiences of workplaces’ which specifies that:

Every student should have first-hand experiences of the workplace through work- visits, work shadowing or work experience to help their exploration of career opportunities, and expand their networks (Department for Education 2023, page 33) ⁶

Following the slow start the calendar was filled up with visits. The offer was very well received by schools. - 260 places were booked, far exceeding the target of 164. Paperwork was seen by schools as a disincentive and the project tried to minimise it as far as possible.

Regrettably, not all booked school visits actually took place. Last-minute cancellations by schools were extremely frustrating for project staff. So were occasions when fewer than 10 pupils arrived although the booking was for 10. One school booked 70 places and used only 13. For one session intended for ten, the school only brought three pupils. Another disappointment from the perspective of project staff was that sometimes schools sent pupils who were unprepared to explore opportunities for green economy careers. Recruitment of the NEET group was a challenge despite the efforts that went into it across the careers team.

3.1.2 Outcomes of Green Steps

Altogether 104 school pupils attended placements which fell short of the target. Missing the target was due mainly to drop-outs by schools at the last minute. Frustrations with attendance also applied to the NEET sessions. For one session only one NEET young person turned up. NEET young people face many complex issues and often live chaotic lives. As described in the UKCRF bid, they may have 'no clear direction or aspiration for the future'. Their capacity to engage with the placement opportunity varied greatly. One young man, following induction and health and safety, was trusted with clearing the wooded area using a range of tools and completed his AQA award. The case worker reflected that he had valued the placement opportunity to help move forward with his confidence and getting back into a normal routine of work and life. Another young man, in contrast, who had been referred to Positive Steps for careers advice did not complete the induction but opened up to the case worker about drug use and its effects on his mental health. As a result, a referral was made to a specialist young persons' substance misuse service. The case worker reflected that although this individual was not at a stage where he could commit to the placement or benefit from it, being referred to Green Steps had provided access to support he needed and this was a good outcome.

Of the 104 year 10 pupils who took part, 98 achieved AQAs. In addition to the non-use of booked places mentioned above, a lesser but also frustrating problem was that some schools sent pupils who were underage and outside the target group. A senior project worker reported, "we gave them AQAs out of our own pocket although we can't count them - we could have sent them back but we are not that sort of organisation".

Feedback from those schools who participated fully was warm and positive

Can I also just say thank you to all of the staff who facilitated the activities for the students it was so enjoyable for both students and staff who attended and I really hope that we can

⁶ Department for Education (2023) Careers statutory guidance
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1127489/Careers_guidance_and_access_for_education_and_training_providers_.pdf

The Gatsby Benchmarks are not statutory but the Department for Education expects all schools to use them to meet requirements to provide independent careers guidance

work together again. You are providing great opportunities for the young people and I'm really grateful for the opportunity for our students to be involved.

Thank you for setting up the week with Northern Roots last week for [] students. They all really enjoyed the week and have given positive feedback.

3.1.3 Green Steps conclusions and learning points

The Green Steps element of Roots of Opportunity was successfully implemented and well received although it fell somewhat short of its targets. It provided an excellent means to connect young people with the natural environment, and raise their awareness of possible career opportunities in the green sector. The experience of environmental conservation actions, especially the two-day sessions for Year 10 pupils, was necessarily short given the need to fit within school timetables. Nevertheless, the programme of micro-placements can be seen as a viable 'proof of concept' for future environmental placements.

Green Steps worked alongside the much smaller and more targeted Skill Mill work experience programme. Sometimes they interacted directly. For example, when only one young person turned up for a planned NEET session, he joined in with Skill Mill group. From the point-of view of project staff the five-day placements were more satisfactory to deliver. However, young people classified as NEET are often highly vulnerable with multiple needs. The placement model in itself did not provide the longer-term, intensive, personalised support that has been demonstrated to work well with NEET young people. This is highlighted by the UKCRF project called 'Greater Manchester's Hidden Talent' dedicated entirely to supporting NEET young people, especially the hardest to reach. It ran at the same time as Green Steps and engaged NEET young people from across Greater Manchester including 22 individuals from Oldham in a six-month programme to address the enduring barriers they face to becoming economically active.⁷

The success of Green Steps depended almost entirely on engaging schools. This demanded concerted effort in activating the partner Positive Steps' connections and reputation with schools across Oldham. Local schools clearly had an appetite for the placement offer (evidenced by bookings that far exceeded target). It looked like an easy win for delivering on their requirements to provide pupils with good careers experience. Despite the partner's excellent track record of working with schools, project team members faced a learning curve in the repeated failure on the part of schools to honour bookings. While it was accepted that in some cases genuine emergencies arose there was certainly a view that commitments were treated lightly by schools and project staff found this 'upsetting'. The fact that the offer was entirely free of financial cost to schools seems to have been double-edged.

Delivery staff in Green Steps regretted that they were not able follow up immediately for the most enthused pupils with suitable volunteering opportunities. One reported, "some young people really took to it and wanted to come back but staff had to say no". A project leader reported that they did try arrange more opportunities but it proved very difficult to find times that would work for schools

⁷ Christie, F and Swingewood A (2022) Greater Manchester's Hidden Talent: Final Evaluation and Assessment <https://www.gmcvo.org.uk/publications/greater-manchester%E2%80%99s-hidden-talent-final-evaluation-2022>

and students when young people would actually have been able to get to the site. Jobs in conservation and similar almost always require volunteer experience so any measures to increase them would be welcome.

3.2 Skill Mill - Intensive Support

The Skill Mill intensive intervention is a work experience programme that helps young people with criminal convictions into sustained education, training or employment. The young people work in teams of four at outdoor tasks with a supervisor for a six-months period and also undertake accredited training to achieve a nationally recognised qualification, for example, in construction skills or health and safety. Supervisors are usually secondees from council services and serve as the link between Skill Mill and the council services that refer the young people. Skill Mill has historically achieved excellent results in progress to employment and reduced reoffending. By 2022 Skill Mill had employed 305 young people and 23 of those have been re-convicted⁸. This makes the re-conviction rate 7.5 per cent compared to the national reoffending rate (England and Wales) of 34.2 per cent for all young people aged under 18 in the year ending March 2020.⁹

The Skill Mill intervention is underpinned by the concept of desistance which proposes that offenders need to move towards an alternative, coherent and pro-social identity in order to justify and maintain a crime-free life¹⁰. Some criminologists have argued that employment reduces crime by providing routines, supervision, and reduced economic incentives for criminal activity but research evidence on employment and desistance is rather mixed¹¹. It is safe to argue that employment itself does not produce desistance in a deterministic sense. Instead, what emerges as significant in enabling or reinforcing efforts to desist from crime are the meaning and outcomes of the nature and/or quality of the work, or simply participation in employment and how these experiences influence an individual's self-concept and social identity - as well as how they interact with a person's priorities, goals and relational concerns¹². In other words, the kind of work is very important. Originally the Skill Mill work experience was specifically related to waterway clearance and land management. Now it is broader but still involves outdoor tasks that are physically demanding with environmental benefits. In this sense the intervention is a very good fit with Northern Roots' ambitions for improving the greenspace.

The Skill Mill intervention model was evaluated and shown to achieve better results than a comparison group with equivalent characteristics¹³. In addition to direct metrics around reconviction rate and further employment, there is evidence of qualitative benefits including increases in the

⁸ Skill Mill primary data

⁹ Youth Justice Statistics 2020/21. England and Wales. Youth Justice Board / Ministry of Justice. 2022 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1054236/Youth_Justice_Statistics_2020-21.pdf Discovering Desistance. Glasgow: IRISS.

¹⁰ McNeill F., Farrall S., Lightowler C. and Maruna S. (2012) *How and Why People Stop Offending: Discovering Desistance*. Glasgow: IRISS.

¹¹ Long, M.A., Oswald, R., Stretesky, P.B. et al. (2019) Do Flood Mitigation and Natural Habitat Protection Employment Reduce Youth Offending? *Eur J Crim Policy Res* 25, 135–151 <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10610-017-9365-y>

¹² Weaver B (2015) *Offending and desistance: The importance of social relations*. London: Routledge.

¹³ Long et al.- 2019 op. cit.

well-being and self-confidence of the young people, awareness of eco-friendly practices, and developing environmental ethics.¹⁴

In Oldham the intensive work experience programme departed from the Skill Mill model in that it had two different target groups, young ex-offenders and also young people in or leaving the statutory care system and struggling to obtain positive progression. There were initially two teams in the cohort each comprising four young people and a supervisor, as is usual for Skill Mill. However, for practical reasons specific to this site having two separate teams proved impossible. Therefore, the two supervisors took responsibility for one big team and that changed the team dynamics significantly.

A notable departure from Skill Mill programmes as organized in other places was that the tasks all occurred on the one site and there were no external employers involved with requirements under a contract to fulfill an agreed job. There was a great deal of work to do on the very large greenspace and working alongside the Northern Roots staff helped the young people to gain experience of many, varied green activities and skills – more than would normally be the case. Tasks included preparing a playground, thinning down trees, fence making, constructing a willow hoop for an arts project (Figure 1), creating habitats for wildlife, and making furniture out of recycled wood (Figure 4). Another difference from other Skill Mill teams was that they were working on the site when volunteers were also present undertaking environmental tasks. Thanks to the presence of the Roots of Opportunity strands on enterprise and culture, they also had the opportunity encounter new creative experiences (see section 3.3) and learn about self-employment (see section 3.4).

Only four young people who started in January 2022 finished the programme which is lower than Skill Mill typically achieves. The cohort was a difficult one, as several staff members mentioned. Three young people had to be dismissed early on for bad behaviour. With hindsight this may have been partly due to the haste with which the cohort was recruited. A supervisor reflected that the expectations both of the young people and the supervisors can be different about the work before they start, and the reality might turn out to be something else, “then you truly know it's not for you and it wasn't for them”.

Role models and new networks are important to the positive identity building associated with desistance from crime. Supervisors in Skill Mill typically act as positive role models. However, being a role model and working with challenging young people is very demanding for the supervisors. One of the Oldham supervisors explained, “You use a lot of energy and effort onto them. That's what we're here for. So that's what it's all about.” Where the young people achieved success it relied on the following factors according to the supervisor, “nine to five routine, training opportunities, they're learning new skills, they're making new friends, and it's about sharing those experiences with each other.”

Three of the four young people who completed the programme were given a one month paid placement by Northern Roots after the end of their six months with Skill Mill. The other had decided

¹⁴ White, R. and Graham, H. 2015. Greening Justice: Examining the Interfaces of Criminal, Social and Ecological Justice. The British Journal of Criminology, Vol 55 (5) <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjc/azu117>

environmental work is not for him. The placement was an opportunity to make the transition from the very supported Skill Mill environment to a real work-like situation.

A second cohort not in the original plan with just one supervisor started in September 2022 and is continuing beyond the UKCRF timeframe. Three are still engaged at the time of writing, one having dropped out.

3.2.1 Skill Mill conclusions and learning points

Outcomes for the individual young people in Oldham were mixed. Their overall success in completing the programme in the first cohort was lower than usual. Those who did so managed to gain AQAs and went on to follow-on employment in the form of a one month paid placements with Northern Roots. We don't have information on any further employment or on reoffending (which is a lagging indicator and the timescale for reporting does not allow it). Nevertheless, the value of the environmental work experience model is recognised in the youth offending service and there is a will to continue if funding would allow.

Skill Mill was known to the lead partner Positive Steps prior to the UKCRF bid but the relationship between Skill Mill and Northern Roots was entirely new. Yet these two very different organisations were able to work constructively together from the outset. It was a significant departure from the usual modus operandi for Skill Mill to rely on a single partner organisation internal to the project to provide work experience opportunities for the young people in a specific location. This proved both a strength and a weakness. It was advantageous in that the programme was able to identify tasks for the young people quickly thanks to the relationship with Northern Roots and the project's unique location on the urban greenspace. Because the project plan in Oldham did not depend on fees for services, delays from the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities were much less significant than for the CRF-funded Norfolk Skill Mill intervention where delays hampered negotiations with external organisations as potential customers. However, the lack of paying customers is a detriment to sustainability beyond the very short UKCRF funded period.



Figure 4 Skill mill young people making seats from recycled wood

3.3 Arts and cultural strategy

An arts and culture strand complements the environmental, skills, community, and business aspects of Roots of Opportunity. For the partner Northern Roots, a key offer of the green space is world class

cultural content rooted in and reflecting the heritage and communities of Oldham. It is aligned with the cultural strategy adopted by Oldham council in 2021 with a vision for 'culture in Oldham to be more visible, accessible, inclusive, innovative, and exciting'.

The contribution of arts and culture to urban regeneration has been widely recognised for many years. High profile cultural development strategies have been adopted successfully around the world in numerous cities since the 1980s and more recently also in smaller towns and rural areas. This is reflected in enthusiasm for competitively awarded titles such as UK City of Culture and European Capital of Culture. Benefits of cultural development include creating or safeguarding jobs, new business opportunities, enhancing confidence and skills, improving the image and prestige of the local area, supporting health and well-being, and social cohesion¹⁵. There is also a recent body of international evidence that culture and heritage can help promote more responsible, pro-social, and pro-environmental behaviours including better treatment of waste¹⁶.

Three public-facing art and cultural events were originally planned on the Northern Roots site under UKCRF funding and four were delivered. Each was quite different but had in common the championing of artists and practitioners from diverse backgrounds, increasing collaboration, and testing what audiences respond to. All were entirely free to attend.

The four events were:

- **10,000 Steps Around the World.** This was a unique arts in the landscape and walking event on Saturday 28th May 2022. Seventy-five participants were taken on a guided journey in small groups through the greenspace to encounter ten different creative performances and installations commissioned for the occasion.
- **Manchester Histories Festival.** Northern Roots teamed up with the Greater Manchester wide *Manchester History Festival* from the 8th to 12th of June. 2022 was the eighth edition of this biennial festival which celebrates heritage and history across greater Manchester. Interactive arts activities on the greenspace complemented exhibitions and talks in Oldham Gallery. In addition to bringing 150 people to the site, digital content created by Salford university students was also released
- **Playing Out at Northern Roots** was a family friendly one-day event on Saturday 16th July 2022. It was attended by 500 people and featured a variety of craft and creative activities, commissioned theatre performances, and a children's poetry competition. The Skill Mill trainees designed and built a natural play feature after meeting with a landscape architect and the Oldham Council play expert.
- **Harvest Fest at Northern Roots** was a special family-friendly event on Saturday 17th September. There was some hesitation about proceeding with it following the death of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II but Northern Roots after careful consideration and conversations with partners decided that going ahead was the right thing to do. There was an installation 'Shadowplay' at dusk and a variety of harvest crafts. There were 600 attendees.

¹⁵ Parkinson, A., Buttrick, J. and Knight, E. (2020) *Arts and Place Shaping: Evidence Review*
<https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/sites/default/files/download-file/placemaking%20wavehill.pdf>

¹⁶ OECD (2021) *Economic and social impact of cultural and creative sectors*
<https://www.oecd.org/cfe/leed/OECD-G20-Culture-July-2021.pdf>

As a result of these events and activities on site, the Skill Mill trainees also had further opportunities to encounter arts and culture in ways that were entirely new to them. A project worker explained, “when we asked them about arts and culture there was complete silence”. The project offered creative workshop activities called ‘eye-openers’ to show the young people you can be creative in a number of ways. These were very well received, adding a new ingredient to the environmental experiences provided by Skill Mill.

The four events formed only part of a wider programme for arts and culture. Other cultural activities took place in spring and summer 2022 that were not within the UKCRF funding. For example, music and art students at Oldham College were asked to respond to a competitive creative brief and create original album cover artwork¹⁷ United Utilities, the water company for the North West, funded a campaign in the neighbouring community of Glodwick to raise awareness of what should and should not be poured into the sewerage system. Known as ‘Let’s Keep the Water Flowing’ this featured various creative activities including film-making and a community mosaic. It drew residents’ attention to Northern Roots and resulted in visits from the neighbourhood to the UKCRF funded events.

The series of four events funded under UKCRF fulfilled the need for close attention to local history and heritage which has been identified as a success factor for arts and cultural activities to deliver on their promised benefits to communities¹⁸. They contribute to building up ‘more and better success stories’, as called for in Oldham’s cultural strategy.

The CRF funding also allowed work on a *Northern Roots Arts & Culture Strategy*. A document was prepared for art and community engagement. Recognising that ‘culture’ can be a somewhat contested term, it starts with a list of what culture comprises, reflecting the remit of Arts Council England, ‘collections, combined arts, dance, libraries, literature, museums, music, theatre and the visual arts’. The document then goes on to set out the outcomes, values and target audiences that will be used to prioritise, develop and evaluate arts and culture programming at Northern Roots. A ‘methodology’ enumerates ways to draw visitors and encourage them to engage with the site. These include many activities trialled through the UKCRF funded programmes: workshops and courses, commissions for creative workers, competitions, and artforms that ‘harness opportunities provided by the landscape such as perambulatory performances and events’. Possible future funding sources are identified including Arts Council England, Heritage Lottery, and health and educational funding.

3.4 Taking Root Ventures: Business support

The call for UKCRF proposals encouraged bidders to include ‘innovative pilots and projects that address local business and innovation needs’. Northern Roots set out to use UKCRF funding to incubate businesses and social enterprises (target four) with a view to creating commercial activities on the Northern Roots site, supporting the circular economy, and attracting visitors.

Small firms and entrepreneurship have been widely argued as important for local development to address unemployment, social disadvantage and exclusion. Governments in the UK (and elsewhere) have promoted business start-up and since the 1980s many policy initiatives have been put in place

¹⁷ <https://www.facebook.com/NorthernRootsCoop/>

¹⁸ Local Government Association (2019) *Culture led regeneration*
<https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/culture-led-regeneration-achieving-inclusive-and-sustainable-growth>

to overcome barriers to entrepreneurship and increase numbers of new enterprises. Business start-up advice and support are available to Oldham residents through the Oldham Enterprise Trust and programmes such as 'Build a Business' with Greater Manchester Libraries. Oldham was also one of the target boroughs for the UKCRF funded 'Start-up Vision' project which offered new business owners and freelancers fully funded advice, training and support services.

The start of Taking Root was delayed when the original provider of business support withdrew soon after being appointed. A replacement was recruited. In March 2022 Taking Root was launched to identify and support small businesses to start operating from the Northern Roots site.

A competition was organised to apply for start-up grants of up to £3,000. There were 19 applications. Shortlisted applicants were invited to attend a session to explore how their idea could fit with Northern Roots. This began as a competitive process but became "very cooperative" according to a senior staff member. A participant also reported that the applicants bonded with each other and shared ideas. Prospective start-ups that did not get selected gained something from attending. They were signposted to where they could look for training or loans. Four fledgling businesses were selected but one withdrew almost immediately. It was replaced by another business whose founder approached the partners directly. The successful applicants were given the opportunity to learn more through a series of seminars.

Three of the four business are concerned with growing crops or recycling waste organic material. In addition, two of them lead educational activities. The other is arts-based also with an educational aspect. In more detail they are:

- **A Compost Service** aims to connect Growing Hubs across the borough and also educate local residents on food waste and home composting through workshops. Two successful workshops have been organised free of charge, one classroom-based for local residents and one (more hands on) specifically for the young people on the Skill Mill intensive programme. Composting on site has been slow to take off due to lack of suitable space during the UKCRF funded period but is now in progress. There are currently no income streams but in future sales of compost and more advanced courses that can be charged for are anticipated.
- **A small-scale willow growing business** succeeded in planting 500 willow whips. The first crop will be harvested in late 2023. There are firm plans for basket-weaving workshops this year.
- **Growing and marketing African Maize** - a product popular with people of African heritage in Oldham but very hard to obtain. It does surprisingly well in the climate of North West England and the business opportunity looked very promising. It was a success for one season despite some setbacks from weather and vandalism but does not seem likely to be continued or expanded.
- **An artistic maker** also offering creative and nature-based workshops.

The businesses reflected the diversity of the community. All were new 'fledging' businesses and essentially one-person bands but involved volunteers. The two start-ups we were able to contact reported that they had anticipated more time and in-depth personal support than it was possible to provide within the resources of the project. In the words of one of them:

You have a passion, an idea [but] it was overwhelming ..I was shortlisted -I was successful.

You think naively they will be coaching you but the time they can provide was limited. It was very bumpy

This speaker found monthly business support sessions provided by Taking Root useful, but feeling in need of more was signposted by the project to a three-day workshop and one-to-one enterprise support offered by Oldham Libraries.

With hindsight the idea of incubating new business enterprises successfully for individuals with so little experience in a few months was overly optimistic. Although the support provided through Taking Root was appreciated, in retrospect it was not intensive enough to meet the needs of people aspiring to business start-up but with no prior business background or knowledge about essentials such as planning, marketing, and securing income streams.

The businesses nevertheless achieved some visibility and involved visitors and volunteers in creative ways, contributing to the environmental and - to a lesser extent - the cultural goals of Roots of Opportunity. They were not ready to step up to achieve economic sustainability. Learning from the Taking Root strand however has been extremely valuable especially for the next phase of Northern Roots which involves tendering the services of a bicycle hub and an apiary.

4.1 Overall delivery

Although the four strands as described in the UKCRF bid may have appeared somewhat unconnected (albeit with cross cutting themes) the reality was more joined up. Indeed, there was impressive alignment and complementarity across the strands of the project. Some examples of their positive intersections include:

- Skill Mill trainees contributed to the enhancement of green spaces and also to creating temporary facilities for arts and culture events
- The composting small business, supported through Taking Root, took Skill Mill Trainees through soil testing and building a compost structure.
- Some pupils in Green Steps participated in cultural activities
- Taking Root led a session to introduce young people in the Skill Mill programme to self-employment as a possible career route bearing in mind that there is evidence it can be a good option for people with convictions who face discrimination in employment. This was well received although the young people were not ready to consider self-employment in the immediate future
- All of the Taking Root businesses took part in CRF arts and culture events, offering workshops and activities for attendees.

The project was managed using a lite version of PRINCE 2 with regular highlight reports and detailed reviews of risks. It was successful in keeping on-track within the tight timeframe and responding quickly to mitigate risks presented by set-backs such as initially slow school recruitment or the departure of a business consultant soon after they were appointed.

Delayed timescales on the part of UK CRF were a source of complaint across the national programme. Roots of Opportunity was no exception, in particular because it was obliged to commence outdoor activities in January rather than in a more clement season as originally anticipated. Nevertheless, the partners were agile enough to commence both Green Steps and the Skill Mill intensive support on time. Other strands were somewhat delayed but also commenced and completed in a reasonably timely fashion, made possible due to extension of UKCRF delivery deadlines.

4.2 Overall impact and futures

It was a criticism of the UKCRF that due to the accelerated time-scale and resultant haste of the preparation and bidding process, projects submitted and funded were less strategic than they could have been¹⁹. This does not seem to have been true of Roots of Opportunity, which was (very untypically) part of a larger place -based initiative. The strategic nature of the rather diverse activities centred upon the Northern Roots greenspace under UKCRF is reflected in the continuation of the borough's Greener Oldham commitment and winning further funding streams from central government.

In October 2022 Oldham councillors approved the planning application for the first major phase of the Northern Roots project. This includes a Visitor Centre, Learning Centre, Forestry Hub, Solar array and sports pitches. Although there were a few objections relating to parking and sports amenities the approval was unanimous. Because green belt land was involved it was referred to the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities for consideration. Having assessed the application, the Secretary of State confirmed that he did not wish to call in the application for further review.

Northern Roots has already commissioned an Apiary and a Bike Hub facility, building on learning from UKCRF project especially the Taking Root strand.

On January 18th 2023 it was announced that Oldham Council has secured £20 million Levelling Up funding for eco-friendly projects in the Oldham East and Saddleworth constituency, including the learning centre at Northern Roots.

The learning centre will provide training linked to green and sustainable skills, supporting the Green Shoots Centre. It will also be used as an educational centre to help strengthen environmental skills through vocational courses²⁰.

This was one of only three successful bids to the Levelling up Fund from across Greater Manchester.

There is still work to do taking proactive measures to look at other available funding streams including non-government ones, and developing a sustainable business model.

This is such a fascinating and inspiring project, much needed for Oldham and hopefully elsewhere in the UK in future. I want my children to enjoy and learn from this vision. (Oldham resident)

¹⁹ Local Government Association 2022b, op. cit.

²⁰https://www.oldham.gov.uk/news/article/2436/oldham_council_secures_20_million_of_new_levelling_up_funding_from_government

*For someone like myself who lives in the community I think it is a really exciting time for us
(project worker and local resident)*

5 Conclusions and lessons learned

The call for CRF bids identified four broad priorities but was non-directive about the extent to which proposed projects should cover one or more of them. This was a deliberate choice on the part of UK government intended to mark a departure from what were seen as the top-down rigidities of previous EU funding streams. Roots of Opportunity – in contrast to other Greater Manchester projects – encompassed all the priorities in its overlapping strands. Its success in doing this to maximise the place-based outcomes is encouraging for future projects that are similarly cross cutting.

The ‘micro-placements’ for year 10 pupils proved to be a successful model that could be replicated to enable many more young people to contribute to the environment and learn about seeking employment in the green economy. The two-day length of the placement seems to represent a viable compromise between depth of work experience and the very limited availability of time within the school curriculum. Local schools were the stakeholders it was vital to involve. The Green Steps offer to schools was a highly attractive as a relatively low-effort route for them to deliver on their statutory requirements on work experience. Many would like the opportunity to be repeated.

It came as no surprise to Positive Steps that working with schools is time consuming and demands sustained effort. Project staff do however seem to have been disconcerted by the willingness of some schools to take the opportunity lightly and book sessions but fail to turn up. A lesson for future initiatives is, do not be deterred from planning to work with schools given the many mutual benefits but be very conscious of the practical challenges and factor them into timescales and targets. One learning point may be that if possible – funding streams permitting – try to avoid the situation where is extremely easy for schools to sign up but entirely cost free to withdraw at short notice. Another is that given the importance of volunteering experience for gaining green employment, it would be good to look for ways to link micro-placements to further volunteering opportunities although it proved too hard to arrange suitable opportunities within the project in view of the time constraints.

An important factor in making the achievements of Roots of Opportunity sustainable is the need to look at other available funding streams. The programme’s only national partner Skill Mill has been successful across the country in gaining resources to pursue its social mission from an unusual combination of public sector, philanthropic and commercial funding. As an environmental service company Skill Mill charges fees. Paying customers include national construction companies and utilities as well as departments of local authorities. In Norfolk, where Skill Mill also delivered a UKCRF project, they secured paid work for their second cohort from the company Equans which manages the maintenance a Royal Air Force base. Not all Skill Mill’s work is done on a fully commercial basis and the work experience opportunities it provides for young people also include activities for community groups and charities which are not charged. The engagement of employers who will pay for the service remains a significant challenge for Skill Mill. The push to gain commercial income involves intensive effort and has faced many set-backs as well as a few successes as in Norfolk. This is not an easy or straightforward route to sustainability but nevertheless there may be aspects from which Northern Roots can learn in diversifying future potential income streams to fulfil the social environmental and cultural strategic aims.

Skill Mill projects in eight of its twelve current sites are funded wholly or partially through social impacts bonds (SIBs). SIBs originated in the UK in 2010. They are a form of outcomes-based commissioning where the finance needed to make the contract work comes from investors who provide up-front capital to organisations to deliver services. Investors make payments only when achievement of outcomes is demonstrated by data. SIBs have attracted growing interest and spread internationally but views about them tend to be polarised and somewhat politicised²¹. They are definitely not a panacea but an option to explore in the context of a diverse mixed economy for funding social, community and environmental programmes in Oldham. Social prescribing is something Northern Roots hope to expand, taking advantage of the health benefits of activities in green spaces. SIBs have been successful in supporting innovative social prescribing projects.²²

There seems to have been a lack of interaction with other UKCRF projects in greater Manchester. This was probably inevitable due to the intense pressure to deliver under very tight timescales but feels like a missed opportunity. Two of the projects were entirely dedicated to target groups included within Roots of Opportunity - NEET young people and new small business owners. Another CRF project tackled skills and work experience in the green economy. It looks like there could have been some constructive mutual learning and even practical cooperation, especially with the 'Hidden Talent' project which worked with NEET young people across Greater Manchester, including Oldham. Green Steps was only partially successful in its offer to this vulnerable group. It is possible that a five-day mini placement in the Oldham greenspace could be a valuable optional stream to consider if the success of Hidden Talent leads – as recommended- to a more permanent service for young people across Greater Manchester.

²¹ Wilson, R., Fraser, A., Kimmitt, J., Tan, S., McHugh, N., Lowe, T., Warner, M., Baines, S., Carter, E. (2020) Editorial: 'Whither Social Impact Bonds (SIBs): the future of social investment?' *Public Money and Management*, 40(3) pp. 179-182.

²² Ways to Wellness Social Impact Bond CBO_ways_to_wellness_second_report.pdf