

Young people take action to tackle coastal environments

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Coastlines, estuaries and rivers – they all face challenges from pollution, loss of biodiversity and climate change.

Now a new scheme has been launched to create a national community of young people to help improve coastal, river and estuary environments, for their benefit and for the benefit of the people who live there.

The Blue Influencers Scheme is a groundbreaking project from UK outdoor education charity The Ernest Cook Trust, to support young people living in areas of deprivation in coastal and estuary locations, by empowering them to tackle environmental and climate issues.

The £2.25 million scheme is being co-funded by The Ernest Cook Trust and the #iwill Fund, and will run for three years. Its ambition is to engage more than 4,000 young people as 'Blue Influencers', as well as over 15,000 community volunteers across England.

The #iwill Fund is made possible thanks to £66 million joint investment from The National Lottery Community Fund and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) to support young people to access high quality social action opportunities. The Ernest Cook Trust is acting as a match funder and awarding grants on behalf of the #iwill Fund.

"Coastlines and waterways are often badly affected by pollution and other environmental harms, and are vulnerable to climate change, increasing the risk of floods, raised sea levels and erosion. These threats to nature and the environment in turn create challenges for people, coastal economies and local industry," said Dr Ian Gambles, Interim Chief Executive of The Ernest Cook Trust.

"At the same time, evidence suggests that despite living in proximity to water, many deprived coastal communities do not feel welcome in these blue spaces or feel connected to their immediate environments.

"The Blue Influencers Scheme aims to tackle both these issues, by empowering young people to take action to help their communities and at the same time become more connected to the environment where they live."

The search is now on for 22 registered charities to become host organisations and receive funding which will enable them to each employ a Blue Mentor.

It's the Blue Mentors' task to enlist young people, targeting ten to 14-year-olds, to become Blue Influencers and create projects that improve their environment. The Blue Mentors will enable young people to gain skills and confidence to identify environmental issues in their communities and develop a social action project to tackle these. Additional funding will also be available to help the young people put their ideas into action.

The Blue Influencers Scheme is a successor to the Green Influencers Scheme, which was also a match funded project between The Ernest Cook Trust and the #iwill Fund and which finished delivery in July 2023.

Through the Green Influencers Scheme, some 7,000 Green Influencers were involved in activities, reaching more than 35,500 of their peers, families and communities. The young people took part in a whole range of initiatives, including seed swaps, hedgerow mapping, plastic reduction and litter clearance, with one group even building an eco-classroom using repurposed plastic bottles.

"Learning from the Green Influencers Scheme, this new scheme takes an even more ambitious youth-led approach to decision-making and will support and empower young people to develop skills, discover new career opportunities and engage communities through youth social action to address key environmental issues," said Dr Gambles.

"We are so excited to find out what the young Blue Influencers will decide to do. The role of the Blue

Mentors is to guide them, but the activities are very much in their hands.”

The Ernest Cook Trust is a UK-wide educational charity, which creates Outdoor Learning experiences for children, young people and their families, on its own estates and with partner estates across the country. It also gives out some GDP2m in grants every year, to support Outdoor Learning activities.

The National Lottery Community Fund awards grants to strengthen society and improve lives across the UK. Thanks to National Lottery players, it will distribute at least GDP4 billion by 2030, supporting activities that create resilient communities that are more inclusive and environmentally sustainable.

For more information about the Blue Influencers Scheme visit <https://ernestcooktrust.org.uk/> or email blueinfluencers@ernestcooktrust.org.uk.

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