



2024

# GREEN PATHWAYS:

EXPLORING PERCEPTIONS, BARRIERS,  
AND OPPORTUNITIES IN THE  
ENVIRONMENTAL JOB MARKET

# About UpRising

UpRising exists because our decision-makers don't reflect the society they serve. We are a national youth leadership development and employability organisation, recognised at Government level as a pioneering charity championing the critical issues surrounding diversity, social mobility, and equality. We support young people (18–25) from underrepresented and underserved communities to fulfil their potential, take on leadership roles and gain meaningful employment.

We achieve this through our award-winning leadership programmes, groundbreaking employment training and a high-quality and ambitious incubated mentoring platform – One Million Mentors. One Million Mentors exists to establish and scale reliable, high-quality mentoring so that every young person in the country has access to a trained mentor as they transition into adulthood.

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# Executive summary

Our research explores perceptions and experiences of green jobs in the UK, drawing from a survey of 1,224 respondents alongside previous research conducted with The Wildlife Trusts engaging 300 young adults. The findings reveal both opportunities and significant structural barriers within the environmental sector.

## Current state of green jobs

- 63.32% of respondents consider their current role to be a green job, with 97% of those stating their job positively impacts the environment
- The understanding of 'green jobs' has evolved beyond traditional environmental roles, now encompassing broader sustainability positions across various sectors
- 55% of respondents view green careers as a practical way to 'future-proof' their careers, indicating a shift from purely values-driven motivation

## Primary barriers

### 1. Financial accessibility

- Low pay and financial insecurity emerged as the dominant barrier (68% of respondents)
- A concerning 74% of respondents reported feeling pressured to undertake unpaid work to enter the sector
- Starting salaries frequently fall below the real living wage

### 2. Skills and training gap

- A mere 5% of young people received any green skills training during secondary school with a clear mismatch between academic preparation and industry needs
- Highly competitive job market (cited by 62% of respondents)

### 3. Lack of diversity

- Persistent structural inequalities particularly affect people from underrepresented backgrounds
- Limited diversity at senior levels creates a shortage of role models
- Financial barriers disproportionately impact those from less privileged backgrounds

## Core recommendations

- Transform entry routes
  - Move away from reliance on unpaid internships
  - Create clear career pathways with proper remuneration
  - Implement competitive pay structures for entry-level positions

- Enhance education
  - Incorporate environmental education throughout the curriculum
  - Develop practical training programmes aligned with industry needs
  - Focus on building technical and digital competencies
- Improve accessibility
  - Create targeted support for underrepresented groups
  - Develop paid apprenticeship schemes
  - Establish proper monitoring of diversity and inclusion efforts

The environmental sector stands at a crossroads. Despite strong environmental commitment, structural barriers threaten to limit talent diversity. Our findings call for urgent, coordinated action from policymakers, educators, and employers to create fairer career pathways. Moving beyond good intentions, the sector must transform how it develops and compensates talent to achieve both growth and social justice aims.

## Context

The report explores perceptions and experiences of green jobs in the UK, based on a survey of 1,224 respondents. It builds on prior research conducted with The Wildlife Trusts, which engaged 300 young adults.

This report looking into the green jobs market in the UK is part of UpRising's ongoing efforts to explore young peoples' perceptions and experiences of the environmental economy, particularly in the context of our Environmental Leadership Programme 2.0 (ELP2). This research builds upon UpRising's involvement in NPC's #EveryonesEnvironment initiative and collaboration with organisations like The Wildlife Trusts, Friends of the Earth, and Students Organising for Sustainability. The report aims to extend the work carried out by the National Lottery funded Our Bright Futures consortium, focusing on how people view so-called green jobs and the broader environmental sector.

Significantly, this report builds on our recent research for The Wildlife Trusts - "Supporting a new generation of diverse change makers: What can The Wildlife Trusts learn from young people?" - a study conducted between April and July 2024 engaging over 300 diverse young adults aged 16-30 through interviews and peer-led focus groups. However, our interest in the green jobs market is longstanding.

UpRising's Green Jobs report stems from over a decade's worth of evaluation and research expertise. Since its establishment in 2008, UpRising has fostered a culture of evidence-based practice, weaving data collection, analysis, and insight generation into the fabric of all its programmes. This commitment has been bolstered through collaborations with respected external evaluators, including DEMOS, the Behavioural Insights Team, and IFF.



*Photo credit: Victoria La Bouchardiere for ELP2*

From 2020 to 2022, the organisation's evaluation capabilities were further honed, thanks to a grant from the Youth Futures Foundation. This funding enabled the hiring of a full-time Data and Insight Officer, not only enhancing UpRising's internal processes but also positioning it as a valuable resource for other entities seeking evaluation support, such as the Office of the Future Generations Commissioner in Wales and the Our Bright Futures consortium. UpRising's approach to evaluation is characterised by robust data-management systems and innovative analysis techniques. The organisation has conducted spatial analyses and applied socio-economic toolkits to gain deeper insights into the demographics and engagement patterns of its participants. This analytical prowess led to the publication of "Understanding Young People's Engagement In Online Programmes", a report that has informed the strategies of other social mobility organisations.

Crucially, UpRising's evaluation methodology is enriched by its commitment to diverse perspectives. The organisation prioritises recruiting staff with lived experiences similar to those of programme participants, contributing to a more inclusive evaluation process and helping to diversify the broader evaluation talent pipeline.

This comprehensive background in evaluation and research lays a solid foundation for the green jobs report, ensuring its findings are grounded in rigorous methodology and informed by a deep understanding of youth engagement in employment and environmental issues.

# Introduction

In an era defined by unprecedented environmental challenges, the concept of 'green jobs' has emerged as a beacon of hope for many young people, promising solutions to issues ranging from climate change to biodiversity loss.

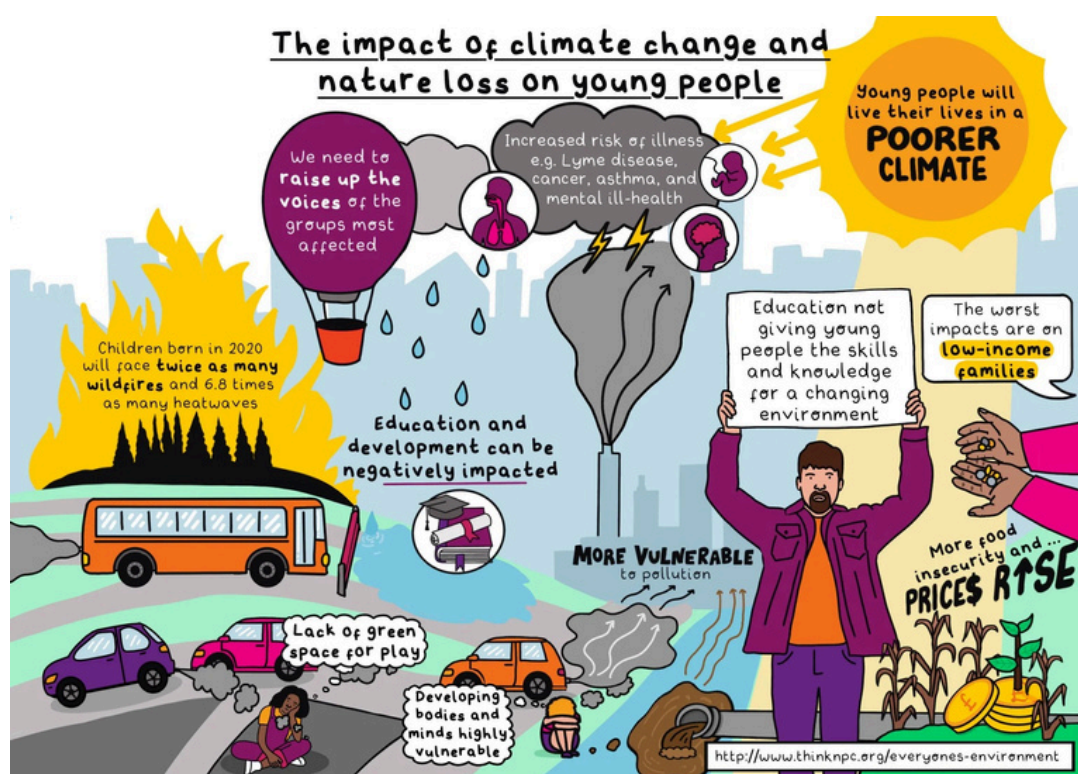
However, the path to these careers is fraught with complexities that mirror broader societal inequalities. Climate issues disproportionately impact young people and those from minoritised communities (Davis et al., 2023), underscoring a critical insight emphasised by the New Philanthropy Capital (NPC)'s Everyone's Environment programme, that: environmental issues are fundamentally about people, with climate change and environmental degradation exacerbating existing inequalities (NPC, 2021). Recent policy recommendations, such as those asked by the Everyone's Environment programme, to policy makers across parties earlier this year, with specific emphasis in their seventh recommendation on the need for "accessible green jobs and skills programmes... especially for underrepresented groups" (NPC, 2024). This policy focus underscores the importance of not only creating green jobs and development programmes, but ensuring they are accessible and beneficial to all segments of society.

It is against this backdrop that we present our analysis of people's perceptions, experiences, and aspirations regarding green jobs. At the heart of our research lies our 2024 survey into green jobs, delivered by UpRising and The Wildlife Trusts which captured the voices of 1,224 people across the United Kingdom. This extensive survey provides fresh insights into how environmental careers are being viewed and engaged with, exploring respondents' understanding of green jobs, motivations and perceived barriers.

To contextualise these findings, we've conducted a thorough review of recent literature, encompassing academic studies, policy reports, and industry analyses from the past five years. This comparative approach allows us to identify evolving trends, highlight areas of convergence or divergence with existing research, and uncover gaps in current understanding that merit further investigation.

By comparing people's experiences with recent literature on skills demands, we assess the efficacy of current educational and training programmes in preparing the future workforce. Our research also sheds light on how perceptions and barriers differ across diverse groups of young people, contributing to ongoing discussions about equity in the green sector and exploring how environmental careers can be leveraged to address broader societal inequalities. Furthermore, as the concept of green jobs rapidly expands beyond traditional environmental roles, and with governments worldwide committing to sustainability goals, our findings can inform evidence-based policies that support a just transition to a green economy, ensuring equitable access to opportunities, particularly for those most impacted by climate change.

Through this analysis, we aim to interpret current perceptions of green jobs, identify primary motivations driving interest in environmental careers, uncover key challenges in entering the green job market, and explore the potential of these careers as pathways for social mobility and environmental justice. Ultimately, we offer actionable recommendations for policymakers, educators, and employers, grounded in both our fresh data and established research, with a focus on creating inclusive pathways into green careers that can help address the disproportionate impacts of climate change.



Above: Visual summary of “How will the climate and nature crises impact young people?” by New Philanthropy Capital’s Everyone’s Environment programme.

# Literature review

## 3.1 Defining green jobs

Despite extensive focus from government and the sector, there remains no agreed-upon definition of 'green jobs' as of Autumn 2024, fragmenting resources and creating barriers for job seekers.

The concept of 'green jobs' has evolved significantly in recent years, reflecting the growing recognition of the interconnected nature of environmental, social, and economic sustainability. However, a comprehensive review of definitions used by various UK organisations reveals a striking need for more consistency in what constitutes a 'green job'.

The UK Government's Green Jobs Taskforce provides a broad definition: *"Employment in an activity that directly contributes to - or indirectly supports - the achievement of the UK's net zero emissions target and other environmental goals"* (UK's Green Jobs Taskforce).

This definition is notable for its broad scope, encompassing not only direct environmental work but also roles that indirectly support sustainability goals. However, even within government bodies, there are variations. The Education Hub, another UK government entity, offers a simpler definition: *"Jobs that contribute to preserving or restoring the environment and our planet are referred to as 'green jobs'"* (Dept. for Education, 2023).

The JobHelp platform, also from the UK Government, expands on this: *"Green jobs are roles that contribute to preserving or restoring the environment and our planet. You could be working in a traditional sector such as manufacturing or construction, or in a new, emerging green industry such as renewable energy and energy efficiency"* (DWP, n.d.).

The private sector and non-governmental organisations present their own interpretations. PwC's Green Jobs Barometer provides a specific definition:



*"We define green jobs as roles that seek to either produce or provide environmentally friendly products and services, or adapt work processes to become more environmentally friendly or use fewer natural resources" (PwC, 2023).*

The variation in definitions extends to environmental organisations. Friends of the Earth states:

*"Green jobs are jobs that have a focus on either reducing carbon emissions, restoring nature or making similar environmental improvements" (Friends of the Earth, 2023).*

Meanwhile, the Alliance for Sustainability Leadership in Education offers a broader perspective in their Green Careers Guide:

*"Green jobs are jobs that help to benefit the environment, generally by protecting, enhancing or conserving it... What makes a job green is whether it supports a positive, or at least less negative impact on the environment" (EAUC Scotland, 2023).*

Some definitions introduce additional elements beyond environmental impact. C40.org (Bloomberg Philanthropies) includes social aspects in their definition:

*"Green jobs include work that helps reduce greenhouse gas emissions (GHG), protects nature and improves wellbeing, while aiming to provide fair wages, safe working conditions, and stable employment" (C40 Cities, n.d.).*

The Office for National Statistics (ONS) provides yet another variation:

*"Employment in an activity that contributes to protecting or restoring the environment, including those that mitigate or adapt to climate change" (ONS, 2024).*

Interestingly, some definitions focus on the evolving nature of green jobs. One report states:

*"Green jobs are jobs that, through an ongoing process of 'greening', can be classified as either 1) new and emerging, 2) subject to significant changes in work and worker requirements, or 3) increasing in demand" (Cardenas Rubio, Warhurst and Anderson, 2022).*

This diversity in definitions underscores the complexity of the concept and the need for a more nuanced understanding. Addressing this confusion, The Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education's Sustainability Framework (IFATE, 2020) categorises jobs into three levels:

- Light green occupations require minimal changes but may need additional sustainability-focused duties.
- Mid-green occupations require new knowledge, skills, and behaviours to utilise new technologies and approaches.
- Dark green occupations are embedded within the sustainability landscape and directly contribute to green outcomes (IFATE, 2020).

This framework provides a more granular view of how sustainability can be integrated across different sectors and job roles, moving beyond the binary of 'green' or 'not green' jobs.

The inconsistency in definitions reflects the evolving nature of the green economy and the diverse perspectives of different stakeholders. It also highlights the challenge in creating policies and educational programmes aimed at fostering green jobs. This variation may contribute to the scepticism reported by young people when they hear phrases such as 'green jobs' and 'every job's a green job', as noted by organisations like UpRising, The Wildlife Trusts, and the Our Bright Future (OBF) consortium.

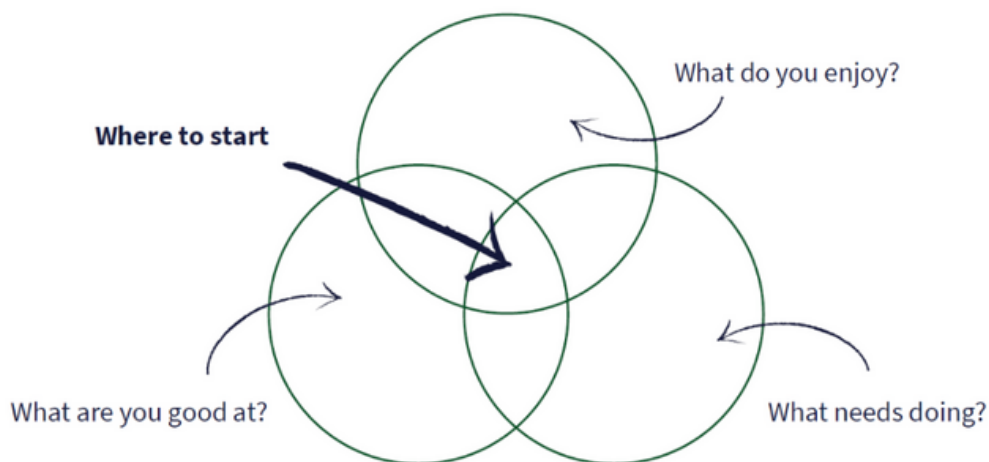
Their concerns focus on the vagueness of terminology ("a vague term with no real meaning"), the practical challenges of implementation ("very few are truly green"), and risks of corporate greenwashing. Notably, this scepticism appears to come primarily from environmentally-engaged individuals concerned about the dilution of meaningful action, rather than from climate sceptics. While the term 'green jobs' has gained widespread acceptance, these findings suggest a need to be more precise in its application and to guard against potential misuse in both policy and communication.

Moving forward, a more standardised and nuanced definition of green jobs may be necessary to effectively guide policy, education, and workforce development.

### 3.2 Motivations for pursuing green jobs

## Environmental passion drives career choices, but young people also seek practical stability and meaningful impact through green careers.

Understanding what drives young people towards green careers is crucial for developing effective strategies to support their entry into this sector. In 2022 one report explored an in-depth study on career progression in the environmental sector, funded by the Esmee Fairbairn Foundation (Nash, 2022). This research highlighted that passion for environmental causes and a desire to make a positive impact are key drivers for young people interested in green jobs. This has been a key ingredient of youth development programmes in recent years, with organisations like UpRising and others across Climate Action Fund funded programmes further building opportunities to develop connection and passion for nature into programme curricula for young people. This has been further supported by the University of Derby's Nature Connectedness Research Group.



*Diagram to support young people with understanding where they can start looking when wanting to move into the green jobs market. (Our Bright Future, 2023)*

Building on this, the legacy of Our Bright Future and their "Green Employability" report (2022) adds another crucial dimension. It emphasises that knowledge about the climate and biodiversity crises is fundamental to motivating young people to pursue green jobs. This report, produced by consortium member YouthLink Scotland for Our Bright Future, suggests that environmental education plays a vital role in not only informing young people

about environmental issues but also in inspiring them to take action through their career choices.

The importance of this motivation is further underscored by the work of Davis et al. (2023) in the Everyone's Environment programme, in which research highlights how climate and nature crises disproportionately impact young people, particularly those from minoritised communities. As such, for many young people, pursuing a green career may be driven not only by a passion to become a change maker advocating for nature, but also by a sense of urgency and personal stake in addressing environmental challenges.

### **3.3 Challenges and barriers**

## **Financial barriers and structural inequalities create compounding obstacles, particularly affecting young people from marginalised backgrounds.**

Despite strong motivations, young people face numerous barriers when entering the green job market. Nash (2022) identifies low pay and financial barriers as a significant issue in the environmental sector, with many entry-level positions offering salaries below the living wage. This creates a substantial obstacle for young people, particularly those from lower-income backgrounds. Nash's research also highlights a persistent lack of diversity and inclusion in the environmental sector, especially at higher organisational levels, leading to a scarcity of role models and mentors for young people from underrepresented groups.

Davis et al. (2023), in their work for the Everyone's Environment programme, explore how structural inequalities intersect with environmental challenges where minoritised communities often bear a disproportionate burden. This inequity extends to access to green job opportunities as well, with UpRising's 2019 report on "Recruiting and Retaining Diverse, Young Talent" identifying lack of confidence as a significant barrier, particularly for young people from underrepresented groups. Many young people may not see themselves reflected in the environmental sector, leading to hesitation in pursuing these careers.

Furthermore, Wales' 2020 Future Generations report on Skills for the Future,

highlights a critical skills mismatch between what young people are acquiring through formal education and what employers in the green economy require. This was confirmed this year with many participants interviewed by UpRising as part of The Wildlife Trusts' exploration into their engagement with young people, explaining that they felt they lacked any significant environmental skills and knowledge after leaving secondary education (The Wildlife Trusts, 2024). These reports emphasise the need for education systems to adapt to the changing needs of the green job market.

In addition to this, UpRising's 2021 report exploring recruitment and retainment of diverse talent provides insights into the regional dimensions of green job opportunities, revealing significant disparities in access to green jobs across different regions of the UK, with some areas offering far fewer opportunities than others (Sannan & McCaughan, 2021).

Additionally, the report examines the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on youth employment, including in the environmental sector, finding that the pandemic exacerbated existing inequalities and created new challenges for young people seeking to enter the green job market.

### **3.4 The role of education and training**

**A fundamental mismatch exists between current educational provision and the green economy's needs, with merely 5% of young people receiving relevant training at secondary school.**

The literature emphasises the crucial role of education and training in preparing young people for green careers. The Future Generations Report (2020) calls for a fundamental shift in how we approach skills development for the green economy, arguing for more practical, applied learning experiences, that align closely with the needs of employers in the environmental sector. This is a recommendation confirmed by others including UpRising, The Wildlife Trust and Everyone's Environment in reports and policy recommendations earlier this year (The Wildlife Trusts, 2024. NPC, 2024).

### **3.5 The potential of green jobs for social mobility**

**Green jobs provide social mobility pathways for those most affected by climate change - if systemic barriers are properly tackled.**

An emerging theme in the literature is the potential for green jobs to serve as a pathway for social mobility, with research highlighting how the same young people who are disproportionately affected by environmental crises could also be the ones to potentially benefit the most from the transition to a green economy - if the right support structures are in place (Davis et al, 2023). Furthermore, The Wildlife Trusts' recent report by UpRising explores what environmental organisations can learn from young people, citing Arnett's exploration of emerging adulthood as key to understanding the complexity and diversity of challenges that 18 to 30 year olds experience, and suggesting a two-way exchange of knowledge and ideas that could help shape a more inclusive and dynamic green job market (The Wildlife Trusts, 2024).

### **3.6 Emerging trends in the green job market**

**The sector is evolving rapidly, with digitalisation and social equity becoming as crucial as environmental expertise.**

While the literature provides a comprehensive overview of the current state of green jobs, several emerging trends are shaping the future landscape of environmental careers. These trends reflect the rapidly evolving nature of the green sector and highlight the need for adaptability and continuous learning among those pursuing green careers.

One of the most significant trends is the digital transformation of green jobs. As noted in Wales' Future Generations Report (2020), digital skills are becoming increasingly crucial for future employment, including in the environmental sector. This transformation is creating new types of green jobs that leverage cutting-edge technologies. For instance, artificial intelligence is now being used for climate modelling, while blockchain technology is being applied to enhance supply chain sustainability. As a result, digital

competencies are becoming as valuable as traditional environmental knowledge in many green careers.

Alongside this technological shift, there's a growing emphasis on social equity within the green jobs sector. The concept of a 'just transition' to a low-carbon economy is gaining traction (Davis et al, 2023) underscoring the disproportionate impact of climate change on young people and marginalised communities, emphasising the need for green job opportunities that not only address environmental concerns but also promote social inclusion. Closely related to this is the increasing recognition of intersectionality in green job creation and access. Nash's (2022) study on diverse career progression in the environmental sector provides valuable insights into how factors such as race, gender, class, and disability intersect to shape both opportunities and barriers in green careers. This growing awareness is pushing the sector to develop more nuanced and inclusive approaches to recruitment, retention, and career development. **These trends reflect a broader understanding that effective strategies tackling climate change must consider social equity alongside environmental goals.**

As the impacts of climate change become more pronounced, there's also a rising demand for jobs focused on climate adaptation and resilience. Davis et al. (2023) touch on this trend in their discussion of how climate change affects young people, pointing to a growing need for roles that can help communities adapt to changing environmental conditions. This shift is creating new career paths in areas such as disaster risk reduction, sustainable urban planning, and ecosystem-based adaptation.

The way we work in green jobs is also evolving. Sannan & McCaughan (2021) discuss how the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated trends towards remote and flexible work. Their report on the changing landscape of employment for young people suggests that these shifts could potentially increase accessibility to green jobs, especially for those in rural or underserved areas. This trend may help to address some of the geographical barriers that have traditionally limited access to certain green careers.

Finally, there's an increasing recognition of the importance of soft skills in green jobs. Our Bright Future's Green Employability report (2023) emphasises that alongside technical environmental knowledge, skills such as communication, leadership, and systems thinking are becoming crucial for success in the climate sector. This trend reflects the complex, interdisciplinary nature of many environmental challenges, which require professionals who

can work effectively across different sectors and stakeholder groups.

These emerging trends paint a picture of a green job market that is dynamic, technologically advanced, and increasingly aware of social and equity issues. As the sector continues to evolve, it will be crucial for education and training programmes, policymakers, and employers to stay abreast of these changes to ensure that young people are well-prepared for the green careers of the future.

### **3.7 Conclusion of the literature review**

This review of the literature reveals a complex and dynamic landscape of green jobs, characterised by evolving definitions, diverse motivations, persistent challenges, and emerging trends. The concept of green jobs has expanded beyond traditional environmental roles to encompass a wide range of occupations that contribute directly or indirectly to sustainability goals. However, this broadening definition is met with some scepticism from young people, highlighting the need for clearer communication about the nature and impact of green careers.

Young people's motivations for pursuing green jobs are deeply rooted in environmental passion and a desire for positive impact (Nash, 2022). This motivation is further fuelled by increasing awareness of climate and biodiversity crises, including among marginalised communities who are disproportionately affected by these issues (Davis et al., 2023). However, despite this strong motivation, numerous barriers persist in the green job market. These include financial constraints, lack of diversity and inclusion, structural inequalities, skills mismatches, and regional disparities.

The literature emphasises the crucial role of education and training in preparing young people for green careers, calling for more practical, applied learning experiences and the integration of environmental education across all levels of schooling (Future Generations Report, 2020; Our Bright Future, 2023). Moreover, there's a growing recognition of the potential for green jobs to serve as a pathway for social mobility, particularly for underserved young people, if the right support structures are in place.

Emerging trends in the green job market paint a picture of a sector that is rapidly evolving. The digital transformation of green jobs is creating new career opportunities that require a blend of environmental knowledge and technological skills (Future Generations Report, 2020). There's also an



increasing emphasis on social equity within the sector, recognising the need for a 'just transition' to a low-carbon economy (Davis et al., 2023). The growing importance of climate resilience jobs, the shift towards remote and flexible work, and the recognition of soft skills alongside technical knowledge are all shaping the future of green careers.

These findings underscore the need for a multifaceted approach to supporting young people in pursuing green careers. This approach must address educational, structural, and cultural barriers whilst also recognising the potential for green jobs to contribute to broader goals of social equity and sustainability. As the sector continues to evolve, it will be crucial for all stakeholders – including educators, policymakers, employers, and young people themselves – to adapt and collaborate in creating a more inclusive, accessible, and impactful green job market.



Photo credit: Victoria La Bouchardiere for ELP2

# Methodology and findings

## 4.1 Methodology

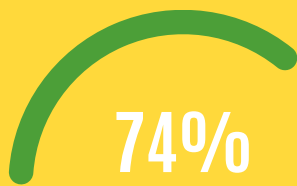
Our survey was conducted to gather first-hand insights from people about their perceptions, experiences, and challenges related to green jobs. The survey employed a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative data collection through an online questionnaire with both closed and open-ended questions.

The survey was sent out to 20,000 individuals who had completed a previous survey by The Wildlife Trust exploring perceptions of the green sector. From this pool, 1,224 individuals responded, representing a response rate of 6.12%. The demographic analysis of respondents revealed some significant patterns:

- **Gender** - The majority of respondents who provided gender information identified as women, but there was a very high non-response rate.
  - Female: 18.46%
  - Male: 8.82%
  - Non-binary: 0.33%
  - Prefer to self-describe: 0.08%
  - Prefer not to say: 0.49%
  - No response: 71.82%
- **Ethnicity** - The respondent pool was predominantly white, with a much lower non-response rate compared to gender.
  - White: 91.58%
  - Asian or Asian British: 0.33%
  - Mixed or multiple ethnic groups: 0.33%
  - Other ethnic group: 0.08%
  - Prefer not to say: 0.57%
  - No response: 7.11%
- **Age** - A broad age range from 17 to 88 years, with most responses concentrated between the ages of 40 and 70, with significant clusters around ages 28, 30, 50, and 57. This suggests strong participation from middle-aged and senior individuals. There is less representation in the 18–25 range, but notable clusters in the late 20s and early 30s indicate a fair number of younger respondents.

This builds on our recent research for The Wildlife Trusts - "Supporting a new generation of diverse change makers: What can The Wildlife Trusts learn from young people?" - a study conducted between April and July 2024 engaging over 300 diverse young adults aged 16-30 through interviews and peer-led focus groups. Where relevant, insights gained from that research are further explored and considered in this report's findings section below.

## 4.2 Key findings



of respondents faced pressure to undertake unpaid work, highlighting a systemic issue that undermines the sector's values.

As noted above, our survey findings should be considered alongside the insights from our recent Wildlife Trusts research, which provided valuable context on young peoples' engagement with environmental issues and organisations. Key findings from that study that inform our interpretation of this green jobs survey results include:

1. Only 5% of respondents reported receiving training in green skills during their secondary education, highlighting **a significant skills gap**.
2. More than 60% of respondents felt they **lacked knowledge about nature and climate change upon leaving school**, with 27% reporting no formal education on these topics.
3. Career satisfaction was identified as a key driver for 27% of respondents, suggesting potential **interest in meaningful environmental work**.
4. **Financial concerns for many**, with financial stability was the second most important driver (30%) and financial pressures were the top challenge (31%) for respondents.

With this context in mind, we can examine the key findings from this survey looking further into green jobs specifically:

### 4.2.1 Perceptions of green jobs and environmental impact

Our survey revealed interesting insights into how respondents perceive their

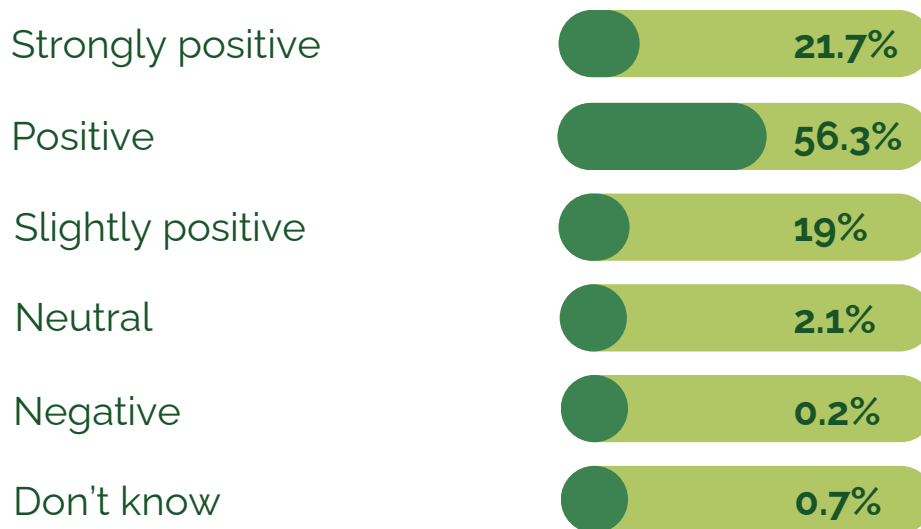
jobs in relation to environmental impact:



**63.3%** considered their job to be a green job

**36.7%** do not consider their job to be a green job

When asked the question, "What level of impact do you think your job has on the environment?", the percentages of those who responded to this question (of which there were 567) were as follows:



Just under half of participants responded to this question. Of these, a striking 97.0% believed their job had a positive environmental impact, with 56.3% reporting "Positive", 21.7% "Strongly Positive", and 19.0% "Slightly Positive". Only 2.3% perceived a neutral or negative impact, and 0.7% were unsure.

However, these findings must be interpreted cautiously. The high non-response rate could introduce significant bias and the overwhelmingly positive perception might indicate sample bias, possibly due to the survey's nature or respondents' job types. With only one negative response, it's difficult to draw conclusions about jobs with potential adverse environmental impacts.

Instead, the real value of our findings lie in the insights we are able to draw out from responses to more qualitative questions around the definitions and perceptions of green jobs and motivations around these.

## 4.2.2 Understanding of green jobs

### Respondents view green jobs holistically, emphasising both environmental impact (78%) and broader societal benefits (39%).

The survey revealed a nuanced and evolving concept of green jobs among respondents. This builds on our findings from The Wildlife Trusts research, which highlighted a gap in environmental education and green skills training in formal education.

Key themes in respondents' definitions included:

1. Environmental focus (78% of respondents) - A significant majority viewed green jobs as directly benefiting the environment. One respondent elaborated: *"Green jobs are about actively working to heal and protect our planet, not just minimising harm."*
2. Sustainability (72%) - Many emphasised the long-term perspective of green jobs. A participant noted: *"It's not just about quick fixes. Green jobs should create sustainable systems that will benefit generations to come."*
3. Reliance on unpaid work and volunteering (74% of respondents) - This emerged as a significant concern, even more prevalent than in our initial analysis. One respondent expressed frustration: *"It feels like you can't even get your foot in the door without months or years of unpaid work. How is that sustainable for most people?"*
4. Climate change mitigation (65%) - A considerable number linked green jobs directly to addressing the climate crisis. One person stated: *"To me, a green job is any role that contributes to reducing our carbon footprint and mitigating the effects of climate change."*
5. Conservation and protection (61%) - Traditional environmental roles were still seen as core to the green job sector. *"Preserving biodiversity and protecting natural habitats is crucial. These jobs are at the forefront of the green economy,"* one respondent explained.
6. Renewable energy (58%) - Many highlighted the importance of transitioning to clean energy. A participant enthused: *"Green jobs are driving the renewable energy revolution. It's exciting to be part of this transformation!"*
7. Broad interpretation across sectors (52%) - Interestingly, over half of the respondents recognised the potential for green jobs across various industries. One insightful comment read: *"Every sector needs to go green. A green job could be in finance, helping to direct investments towards sustainable projects, or in fashion, creating eco-friendly textiles."*

8. Minimal environmental impact (47%) - Some defined green jobs by their lack of negative impact. *"It's about doing no harm. A green job should have a neutral or positive effect on the environment,"* one respondent explained.
9. Education and awareness (43%) - Many recognised the importance of spreading environmental knowledge. A passionate respondent said: *"Green jobs aren't just about direct action. Educating others and raising awareness is crucial for long-term change."*
10. Ethical considerations (39%) - A significant minority emphasised the ethical dimension of green jobs and the role they should play within society. One thoughtful response read: ***"Green jobs should align with principles of social justice and equity. They're not just about the environment, but about creating a fairer world for all."***

### 4.2.3 Understanding of green jobs

## Respondents view green jobs holistically, emphasising both environmental impact (78%) and broader societal benefits (39%).

1. Passion for environmental causes (82% of respondents) - This was overwhelmingly the top motivator. One respondent expressed: *"I've always loved nature. Working in a green job feels like a way to turn that passion into a career that makes a real difference."*
2. Desire to make a positive impact (79%) - Many were driven by the potential to contribute meaningfully to society. A participant shared: *"I want to look back on my career and know that I've helped create a better world. Green jobs offer that opportunity."*
3. Addressing climate and biodiversity crises (71%) - The urgency of current environmental challenges was a significant motivator. One person stated: *"We're in a climate emergency. I feel a responsibility to be part of the solution, and a green job lets me do that every day."* This sense of urgency and responsibility also came across strongly in our research with The Wildlife Trusts, with many young interviewees articulating a sense of duty to the planet but also to each other and future generations.
4. Personal fulfilment (68%) - Many respondents cited the personal satisfaction derived from green jobs. *"Knowing that my work aligns with my values gives me a sense of purpose I couldn't get from a regular 9-to-5,"* one participant explained.
5. Future-proofing career (55%) - A significant number saw green jobs as a smart career move. One forward-thinking respondent noted: *"As we transition to a low-carbon economy, green jobs will be in high demand. It's a growing field with lots of opportunities."*

#### 4.2.4 Challenges and barriers

### Financial barriers (68%) and unpaid work requirements (59%) create compounding obstacles to entering the sector.

Our survey highlighted several key barriers, many of which echo and expand upon the challenges identified in our work with The Wildlife Trusts. That study highlighted financial pressures and lack of environmental education as significant issues. Our survey provides more detailed insights into these and other barriers:

1. Low pay and financial insecurity (68% of respondents) - This was the most commonly cited barrier. One frustrated respondent shared: *"I'm passionate about environmental work, but the pay is often so low that it feels unsustainable as a career choice."*
2. Competitive job market (62%) - Many found it difficult to break into the sector. A recent graduate explained: *"It feels like there are hundreds of applicants for every entry-level position. It's really disheartening."*
3. Reliance on unpaid work (59%) - The prevalence of unpaid internships was a significant concern. One respondent noted: *"It seems like you need to do multiple unpaid internships before you can even be considered for a paid position. That's just not feasible for many of us."*
4. Lack of diversity and inclusion (57%) - This was a particular concern for respondents from minoritised backgrounds. One interviewee shared: *"I often feel like an outsider in environmental spaces. There's a lack of representation that can be really isolating."*
5. Structural inequalities (54%) - Many recognised systemic barriers to entering the green job market. A thoughtful response read: *"It's not just about individual effort. There are systemic issues like unequal access to education and networks that make it harder for some of us to get these jobs."*
6. Greenwashing concerns (43%) - A significant minority expressed scepticism about the authenticity of some green jobs. One respondent noted: *"Sometimes it feels like companies are just using 'green' as a marketing ploy. It makes me question whether these jobs are really making a difference."*

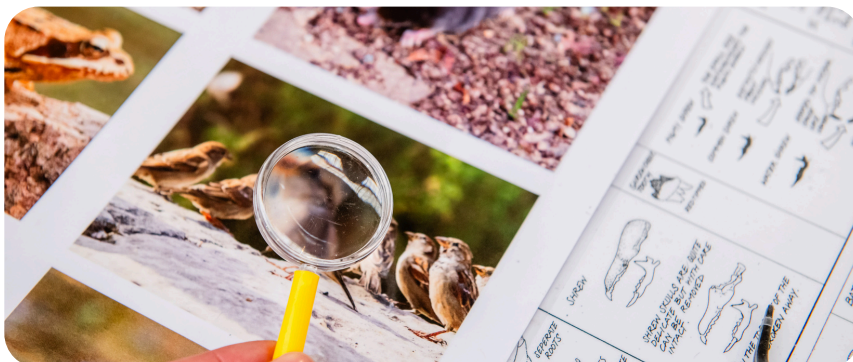


Photo credit: Victoria La Bouchardiere for ELP2

#### 4.2.5 Opportunities and advice

A concerning disconnect exists between established professionals recommending unpaid work (76%) and young people's ability to access these opportunities.

It is incredibly interesting to synthesise the findings from our research with The Wildlife Trusts, which explicitly highlighted the significant challenges young people from minoritised and working-class backgrounds face when engaging with environmental organisations, specifically around access to meaningful, accessible training and development opportunities, with responses from this survey - a very different demographic of people, mostly older and further along or nearing the end of their careers in the environmental sector. Respondents offered the following advice for entering green careers:

1. Gain experience through volunteering and internships (76% of respondents) - This was the most common piece of advice. One respondent emphasised: *"Any experience is valuable. Even if it's just volunteering on weekends, it shows your commitment and helps you build skills."*
2. Develop relevant skills and qualifications (72%) - Many stressed the importance of targeted education. A participant advised: *"Look into specialised courses or certifications in sustainability. They can really set you apart in job applications."*
3. Be passionate and committed (69%) - Enthusiasm was seen as a key asset. One interviewee shared: *"Employers can teach you skills, but they can't teach passion. Let your genuine commitment to the cause shine through."*
4. Be open-minded about roles and sectors (65%) - Many advised thinking creatively about green careers. One insightful comment read: *"Don't limit yourself to traditional environmental roles. Look for ways to bring sustainability into different industries."*
5. Network and make connections (58%) - Building professional relationships was seen as crucial. A respondent noted: *"Attend environmental conferences, join professional associations, connect with people on LinkedIn. Personal connections can often lead to job opportunities."*
6. Develop specialist knowledge (53%) - Some advised focusing on niche areas. One participant suggested: *"Find a specific environmental issue you're passionate about and become an expert in it. Specialised knowledge can make you invaluable."*
7. Consider the broader impact (49%) - Many emphasised the importance of



systems thinking. A thoughtful response read: *"Always consider the wider implications of your work. How does it connect to other environmental and social issues? This kind of holistic thinking is really valued in the field."*

### 4.3 Exploring the volunteer dilemma

**A stark paradox exists as whilst 74% of established professionals advocate volunteering as an entry route, this reliance on unpaid labour actively undermines the sector's equity goals and excludes diverse talent.**

A striking finding from our survey was the **near-unanimous sentiment that volunteering or unpaid internships were necessary to enter green careers**. 74% of respondents indicated they had engaged in or felt pressured to engage in unpaid work to gain experience in the sector. A jarring sentiment when considering how many of the 300 young people we recently engaged with through The Wildlife Trusts research shared how inaccessible these opportunities were.

Furthermore, this view of the importance of unpaid work stands in stark contrast to evolving best practices in recruitment and equity. In 2019 UpRising's report on "Recruiting and Retaining Diverse, Young Talent" provided crucial insights into why this reliance on unpaid work is problematic:

1. **It reinforces inequalities**, with unpaid opportunities disproportionately benefitting those who can afford to work without compensation, often excluding young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds.
2. By creating financial barriers to entry, unpaid work **contributes to the lack of diversity in the sector**, perpetuating existing power dynamics and homogeneous workplace cultures.
3. **It feeds a skills mismatch**, with volunteer roles often not providing the structured learning and skill development that paid internships or entry-level positions offer, potentially leaving young people ill-prepared for actual job requirements.
4. A reliance on unpaid labour can lead to a **devaluation of environmental work, potentially contributing to the low pay issues identified in the sector**.

The UpRising report emphasises that "unpaid opportunities just reinforce the existing power dynamics and structures and thus will just reinforce the

challenges that already exist" (UpRising, 2019). This insight is particularly relevant given our survey's demographic skew towards white, university-educated women, suggesting that the current system may be perpetuating barriers for underrepresented groups.

Our findings, coupled with the UpRising report's recommendations, suggest a **pressing need for the environmental sector to move away from unpaid work as a standard entry route**. Instead, organisations should focus on creating paid internships, apprenticeships, and entry-level positions that provide well-paid, meaningful, structured learning experiences that are accessible to young people from diverse backgrounds. Furthermore, it should also be considered that unless employers start to remunerate appropriately for green jobs, then they may never be considered as true corporate supported roles and goals, but instead merely as environmental 'payoffs'.

This shift is not only ethical but also strategic. By broadening the talent pool and creating more equitable entry routes, the green job sector can benefit from diverse perspectives and innovative ideas, crucial for addressing complex environmental challenges.



Photo credit: Victoria La Bouchardiere for ELP2

# Discussion

## 5.1 Evolving perceptions of green jobs

Our survey reveals a broad and nuanced understanding of green jobs, extending beyond traditional environmental roles. This aligns with the growing recognition in the literature that sustainability should be embedded across all sectors. However, our survey adds depth to this understanding, revealing that people not only recognise the potential for green jobs across various industries but also emphasise the ethical and social dimensions of these roles.

**Interestingly, while the literature often focuses on technical definitions of green jobs, our survey respondents often framed their understanding in terms of impact and values.** This suggests a shift in perception from green jobs as a category of employment to a broader ethos of work that contributes to environmental and social sustainability.

The scepticism about the term "green job" uncovered in our survey adds a new dimension to the discussion, suggesting a need for more transparent and authentic approaches to creating and labelling green jobs. It also indicates that young people are critically engaging with the concept of green jobs, rather than accepting it at face value.

## 5.2. Motivations and aspirations

Our survey findings on motivations for pursuing green jobs largely align with previous research, such as Nash (2022), which highlighted personal commitment to environmental causes as a key driver. While passion for environmental causes remains the top motivator, we also found a strong emphasis on the desire to make a positive impact and address specific crises like climate change and biodiversity loss.

Interestingly, our survey revealed a "future-proofing career" as a significant motivator, with 55% of respondents citing this. This practical consideration is less prominent in the reviewed literature, which tends to focus more on altruistic motivations, suggesting that people are not only idealistic about green jobs but also view them as a strategic career choice in a changing

economy. This was an interesting consideration for young people involved in focus groups for The Wildlife Trusts research, with many contributors suggesting that they saw the environmental sector as providing solid, long-standing and stable careers, but that breaking into these roles was the challenge (The Wildlife Trusts, 2024).

### 5.3 Persistent barriers and the problem of unpaid roles

The environmental sector's heavy reliance on unpaid work emerges as one of the most concerning findings of our research. While 74% of respondents reported engaging in or feeling pressured to undertake unpaid work, this practice fundamentally contradicts the sector's stated values of equity and sustainability. This is not merely a barrier to entry - it represents a systemic issue that actively excludes talent from disadvantaged backgrounds and perpetuates existing inequalities. Our findings provide a more nuanced picture of how these barriers are experienced and perceived by young people.

For instance, **while the literature often discusses low pay as a general issue, our survey respondents provided vivid accounts of how this impacts their career decisions and daily lives.** The high percentage (68%) citing this as a barrier underscores the urgency of addressing this issue to make green careers more accessible and sustainable.

Our findings on the prevalence of unpaid work as an entry route, with 74% of respondents sharing this as either their own experience of entering the sector or their advice to young people, add a crucial dimension to understanding barriers in the sector and raise serious concerns about equity and access in the green job market. This finding adds depth to the discussion of structural inequalities (Davis et al., 2023), showing how seemingly beneficial practices like internships can actually exacerbate existing disparities. The insights from the 2019 UpRising report on "Recruiting and Retaining Diverse, Young Talent" are particularly relevant here, highlighting how unpaid opportunities reinforce existing power dynamics and structures. Our survey confirms **that reliance on volunteering and unpaid internships appears to be a significant factor in perpetuating other barriers, particularly those related to diversity and inclusion.**

However, it's crucial to note that this perception among survey respondents is being addressed with evolving industry standards and organisations increasingly recognising the problematic nature of unpaid work. The sector is

moving towards more equitable entry routes, recognising that reliance on unpaid work limits diversity and perpetuates inequality. For example, London Wildlife Trusts' 'Keeping It Wild' programme, providing paid traineeship opportunities for young people aged 16-25 to kick-start their nature conservation careers and get involved with decision-making at the Trust.

## 5.4 Challenges around diversity and inclusion

Our survey findings on the lack of diversity in the sector, particularly from the perspective of people from ethnically minoritised communities, add weight to previous research on this issue. The vivid accounts from our respondents of feeling like "outsiders" in environmental spaces highlight the personal impact of this lack of diversity. This suggests that despite growing awareness of the issue, significant work remains to be done to make the green job sector truly inclusive and representative.



Above: Visual summary of "How will the climate and nature crises impact young people?" by New Philanthropy Capital's Everyone's Environment programme.

# Recommendations

Based on our survey findings and the reviewed literature, we propose the following recommendations for policy makers, environmental organisations, educational institutions and training providers:

- 1. Transform the sector's relationship with unpaid work:** The environmental sector must move away from relying on unpaid labour as an entry route. Establish paid internships and entry-level positions that provide structured learning experiences. Develop clear frameworks to distinguish between professional skill-building roles (which should be paid) and traditional volunteering opportunities. Set industry standards for fair compensation at all levels and build partnerships with funders to support this transition. While challenging for organisations accustomed to unpaid labour, this change is essential for creating an equitable and sustainable sector.
- 2. Enhance education and training opportunities:** Develop targeted green skills programmes and integrate environmental education across all levels, ensuring accessibility for underrepresented groups. Create meaningful mentorship programmes to connect young people with experienced professionals in the sector.
- 3. Improve career support for young people and emerging adults:** Establish clear career pathways in the environmental sector and replace unpaid internships with paid apprenticeships. Provide comprehensive career counselling services focused on green jobs, making these accessible to diverse communities.
- 4. Engage employers and educational establishments:** Encourage competitive compensation for entry-level green jobs and promote diversity initiatives within environmental organisations. Foster partnerships between employers and educational institutions to ensure curriculum relevance and provide work-based learning opportunities.
- 5. Implement supportive policies:** Develop an "Every Job Is A Green Job" framework to expand sustainability roles across industries and address challenges with varying definitions for green jobs. Advocate for policies that address climate change impacts on marginalised young people, linking these to job creation in the green sector. Invest in green initiatives in rural and economically disadvantaged areas to promote equal access to green jobs.
- 6. Ensure transparency and support:** Develop mechanisms to monitor the effect of green jobs on social mobility and diversity. Create support systems

within green jobs to help manage eco-anxiety while working on challenging environmental issues.

By implementing these recommendations, we can work towards a more inclusive, accessible, and impactful green job market that truly serves the diverse population of young people eager to contribute to environmental sustainability.



*Photo credit: Victoria La Bouchardiere for ELP2*

## Conclusion

The green jobs sector stands at a critical crossroads. Our research reveals a complex landscape where youthful enthusiasm collides with stubborn structural barriers. Today's young people demonstrate an impressive understanding of sustainability, recognising its relevance across diverse industries beyond traditional environmental roles. This expanded perspective is reshaping the very definition of green jobs, pushing us to consider how every sector can contribute to a sustainable future.

However, this broadened outlook and the overwhelming desire among young people to tackle climate change head-on through their careers is meeting significant obstacles. Low pay, a lack of diversity, and an over-reliance on unpaid work continue to limit access to green careers, particularly for underrepresented groups. The prevalence of unpaid internships as a primary entry route is especially problematic, creating an 'experience paradox' that perpetuates inequality and narrows the diversity of talent entering the field.

These challenges aren't just hurdles for individual job seekers; they represent a systemic issue that threatens to undermine the entire sector's potential. The environmental challenges we face require a diverse range of perspectives and skills, but by maintaining barriers to entry, the green job market is cutting itself off from a wealth of talent and innovation precisely when it needs it most.

The situation demands joined-up action from different angles - from educational institutions who must better integrate green skills, equipping students with the skills and knowledge needed in the green economy; employers who must step up to routinely offer competitive pay for entry-level positions and create well-structured, paid apprenticeship programmes to replace unpaid internships; and the industry as a whole, which must prioritise diversity and inclusion, recognising that a multitude of voices and experiences is crucial to addressing complex environmental issues.

Policymakers have a crucial role to play in this transformation. We need robust frameworks that support green job creation, ensure equitable access to these opportunities, and incentivise businesses to adopt sustainable practices. The concept of "Every Job Is A Green Job" should be more than an aspiration; it needs to be backed by concrete policies that mainstream sustainability across all sectors of the economy.

Despite these challenges, there's reason for optimism. The passion and commitment of young people entering or aspiring to enter the green job market are palpable. This enthusiasm, if properly channelled and supported, has the potential to drive significant positive change. Innovative companies are already recognising the value of diversity and fair compensation in attracting top talent and forward-thinking educational institutions are forging closer ties with industry to ensure their curricula remain relevant and practical.

As we move forward, regular assessment and adaptation will be crucial. We must establish mechanisms to monitor progress in diversity, accessibility, and career development within the green job market, creating not just more green job opportunities, but ensuring these roles are accessible, fairly compensated, and offer meaningful career progression.

By addressing the barriers identified in this report and implementing targeted solutions, we can foster a more inclusive, dynamic, and impactful green job market. This is more than an employment issue; it's about empowering a generation to lead the charge in addressing our most pressing environmental challenges.



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*Photo credit: Victoria La Bouchardiere for ELP2*

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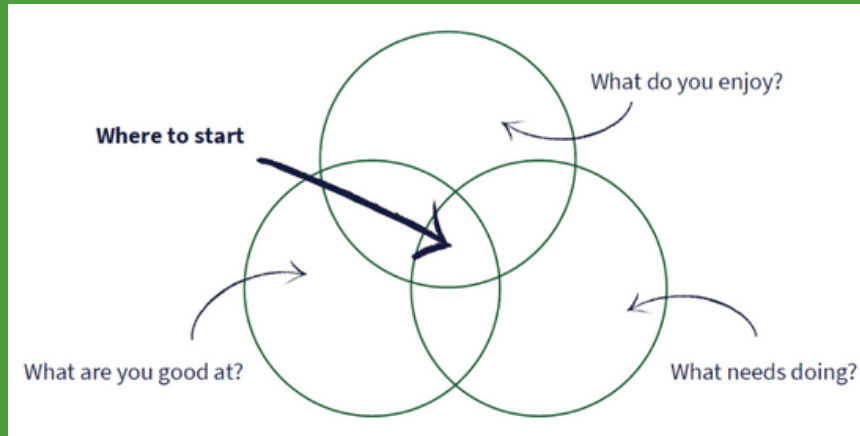
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**2024**

# Breaking into Green Jobs: A Practical Guide for Young People in the UK

The green job market is expanding rapidly, offering exciting opportunities for young people passionate about making a positive environmental impact. However, entering this field can be challenging. This guide, based on recent research in the UK, provides practical advice to help you navigate your path into a green career. This guide is not a step-by-step guide, but more a collection of ideas and advice to support you in your journey into the green jobs market.



*Diagram to support young people with understanding where they can start looking when wanting to move into the green jobs market. (Our Bright Future, 2023)*

## 1. Understand what "green jobs" really mean

- Green jobs extend beyond traditional environmental roles. They can be found in various sectors, including finance, technology, and manufacturing.
- Focus on roles that contribute to sustainability, reduce environmental impact, or address climate change.
- Remember: Many jobs can be "greened" – consider how you can bring sustainability into any role.

## 2. Develop relevant skills

Key areas to focus on:

- Environmental science and sustainability principles
- Data analysis and digital skills
- Project management
- Communication and advocacy
- Specific technical skills relevant to your chosen field (e.g., renewable energy technology, sustainable agriculture, green building practices)

How to acquire these skills:

- Look into specialised courses or certifications in sustainability (e.g. ELP2)
- Participate in online learning platforms (e.g., FutureLearn, Open University) offering environmental courses
- Attend workshops and webinars on green topics
- Join environmental societies at your school, college or university

### **3. Gain experience**

- Look for training opportunities that include elements of real-life experience and applied learning (e.g. ELP2)
- Look for internships or part-time jobs in sustainability-focused organisations
- Start or join a sustainability initiative in your current workplace or educational institution

Note: While unpaid internships are common, be cautious about relying too heavily on unpaid work. Look for paid opportunities where possible, and be strategic about any unpaid experience you take on. Remember, many unpaid internships in the UK may not be legal unless they're part of a course or volunteer work for a charity.

### **4. Build your network**

- Attend environmental conferences and events (many offer student discounts)
- Join professional bodies related to your area of interest (e.g., IEMA, CIWEM)
- Connect with professionals on LinkedIn and X and engage with their content
- Participate in online forums and discussion groups about green jobs and sustainability

### **5. Stay informed**

- Follow environmental news and policy developments, particularly UK-specific policies and initiatives
- Subscribe to newsletters from leading environmental organisations (e.g., Friends of the Earth, Greenpeace UK, WWF UK)
- Read industry reports and academic publications in your area of interest
- Stay updated on emerging trends in green technology and sustainable practices in the UK

### **6. Craft your personal brand**

- Develop a compelling personal statement that articulates your passion for sustainability
- Create a portfolio showcasing any relevant projects
- Tailor your CV to highlight skills and experiences relevant to green jobs
- Maintain an active professional social media presence focused on environmental topics

### **7. Be open-minded about roles and sectors**

- Consider roles in traditional industries that are transitioning to more sustainable practices
- Look into start-ups and innovative companies working on environmental solutions
- Explore opportunities in government agencies (e.g., Environment Agency, DEFRA) and policy organisations
- Don't overlook roles in education, communication, or community engagement related to sustainability

### **8. Address potential barriers**

### Financial Constraints:

- Research scholarships and bursaries for environmental studies or projects
- Look for paid internships or work placements in sustainability fields
- Consider part-time work to support yourself while gaining relevant experience

### Lack of diversity in the sector:

- Seek out mentorship programmes specifically designed for underrepresented groups in environmental fields
- Join networks and organisations that support diversity in sustainability careers (e.g., SocialFixt, BAME in Sustainability)
- Be prepared to be a changemaker – your presence can help make the sector more inclusive

## 9. Develop specialist knowledge

- Identify a specific environmental issue or area that you're passionate about
- Conduct independent research or projects in this area
- Consider writing articles or starting a blog to showcase your expertise

## 10. Prepare for the future

- Stay adaptable and ready to learn – the green job market is rapidly evolving
- Develop transferable skills that will be valuable across different roles
- Consider how your skills could apply to emerging areas like circular economy, sustainable finance, or climate tech

Breaking into the green job market requires passion, persistence, and strategic planning. By focusing on skill development, gaining relevant experience, and building a strong network, you can position yourself for a rewarding career in sustainability. Remember, every step you take towards a green career is a step towards a more sustainable future for all.



Photo credit: Victoria La Bouchardiere for ELP2

*This resource was developed in response to the 2024 report "Green Pathways: Exploring Perceptions, Barriers, and Opportunities in the Environmental Job Market" produced by UpRising and commissioned by YFF (Youth Futures Foundation).*