

Evaluating the Npower Business Solutions Foundation funded Venturists

The Venturists youth action programme began in 2020 to add a further innovative strand to Participate Projects' work in finding, exploring and supporting ideas that contribute positively towards people, place and planet. Participate recognises that young people often think creatively and without the constraints of practicalities and the Venturists programme harnesses this creativity by encouraging them to explore issues in their local community and develop ideas about how to tackle them. The Venturists includes school-based sessions, inspirational talks and trips involving a wide range of local organisations, and the infamous 'Dragons' Den' where students pitch their ideas to try and secure funding for them. Importantly, students then go on to deliver their projects often with significant impacts for the school, community and / or local organisations.

Npower Business Solutions Foundation funding has enabled the Venturists programme to be run in 5 primary schools and Bradford College between January and July 2025. These programmes have been focused on sustainability and environmental solutions in line with the funding aims.

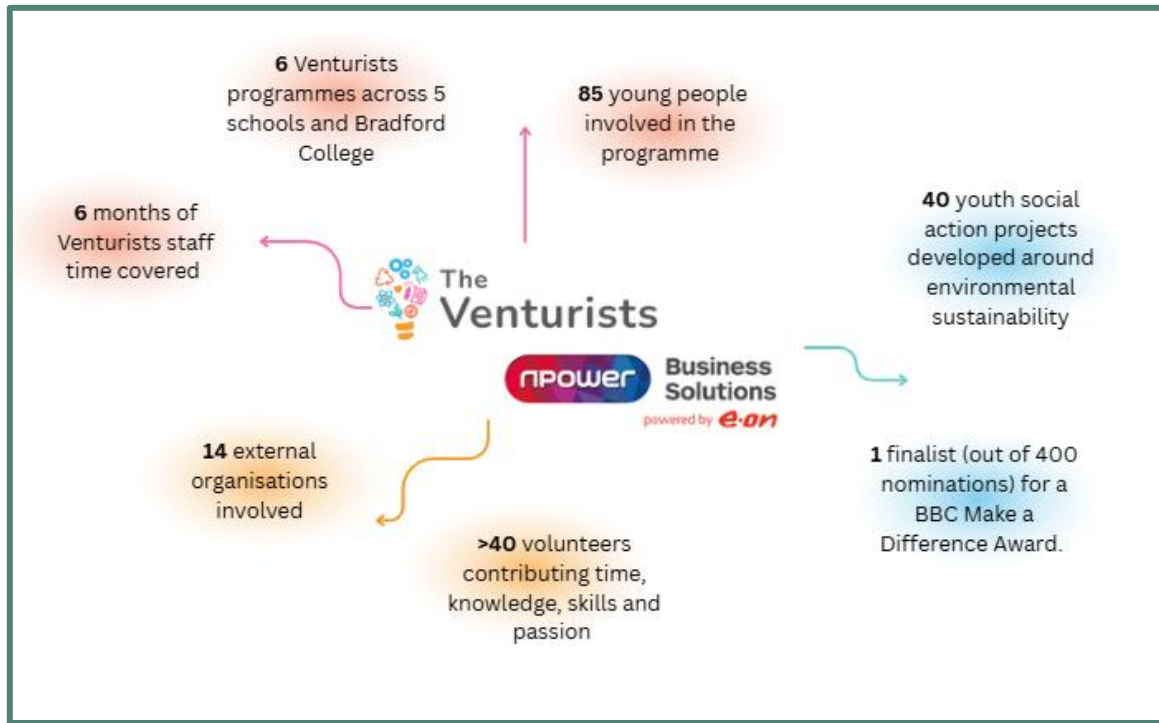
This report outlines findings from research evaluating the work the Npower Business Solutions Foundation funding enabled. Our key findings are:

- Over the 6 months of the Npower Business Solutions Foundation funded programme, the Venturists had an impressive reach in terms of numbers of students involved, external organisations engaged and even an award nomination!
- The funding meant the programme reached those that needed it most – all the students were identified as having some educational difficulties relating to e.g., social, emotional and mental health needs, communication, confidence, self-esteem.
- The exciting and varied programme led to big impacts, especially around building confidence, skills, relationships, leadership and engagement in class.
- The structure of the programme, the ownership and freedom of choice students had, Participate's networks of external individuals and organisations and Jill's excellent ways of working meant it was very effective in achieving its aims.
- An exciting new partnership was successfully developed with Bradford College students and ACS Group, resulting in a fantastic sustainability garden.
- All involved would like to reach more children through the Venturists but a lack of reliable future funding to cover staff time was seen as a challenge to being able to plan and increase impacts from the programme.



Snapshot of what the Npower Business Solutions Foundation funding enabled

Over the 6 months of the Npower Business Solutions Foundation funded programme, the Venturists had an impressive reach in terms of numbers of students involved, external organisations engaged and even got an award nomination!



Exploring the programme

Qualitative interviews with teachers, volunteers and external organisations, as well as a light touch social media review allowed us to explore these numbers in more detail to better understand what the Npower Business Solutions Foundation funding enabled. Some key themes emerged around who was taking part, what the programme involved and the impacts, as well as what it was that made the programme so effective. These are explored below.

Benefiting those that most need it

All the schools engaged with the Venturists during the Npower Business Solutions Foundation funding period have high levels of Free School Meals, high numbers of pupils accessing Pupil Premium Funding and the schools are located in the 10% most deprived neighbourhoods in Bradford. The 85 young people that took part in the Venturists between January and July 2025 were all chosen by their teachers because they knew they would benefit the most from the programme. 80% were from marginalised communities and all were identified as having educational difficulties relating to social, emotional and mental health needs, communication, confidence and self-esteem. In the primary school context, the focus was largely on Year 5. At Lady Royd Primary this was because it is recognised that transitioning from Year 4 to 5 can be difficult and at Beckfoot Heaton Primary School it was hoped that the leadership skills developed might be used in Year 6:

'[We chose] our year fives and it was a really great cohort to choose. So, they've struggled sometimes both academically and socially in the classroom ... And when they go into year six children can apply to become a student leader in our school. And so, [the Venturists is] a wonderful programme that can get them ready into thinking about what that might mean and whether they'd like to take that forward as well.'

Claire Light - Curriculum Lead, Beckfoot Heaton Academy

Within those year groups, teaching staff chose children who were struggling for various reasons. For example, at Lady Royd Primary, 15 students from Year 5 took part who were struggling with e.g., their confidence, communication and / or 'finding their voice'. It was felt that the smaller group setting which enabled one to one time with the adults involved would be especially beneficial to them. At Beckfoot Heaton Primary School, 16 pupils from Year 5 were chosen who had low self-esteem, were struggling with academic work and / or were struggling to make connections. At Whetley Academy, children who come from larger families or who have difficult home circumstances were chosen to participate, in particular those who have siblings with profound needs:



'We went this year for children who are living in a family where a sibling has profound needs or where there's been a lot of domestic issues to give those kids the opportunity and the attention and help them build their confidence.'

Suzanna Morrison - Assistant Principle, Whetley Academy

An exciting and varied programme!

Across the Venturists programme, students undertook a range of exciting, practical and creative activities focused on sustainability and the environment. They began by exploring environmental issues through upcycling t-shirts into tote bags and glass jars into tealight holders, and making models of innovative new ideas to solve environmental issues from plasticine:

'It was nice to see the children get hands on and get creative. And for them to have time and space away from the classroom.'

Representative from Lady Royd Primary

Following on from these creative ideas sessions, the Venturists then started to develop their own environmental projects, designing logos and branding, budgeting for the resources they needed and pitching to the Dragons in the Dragons' Den! When the Venturists were successful in securing their funding, they were able to make their projects actually happen with the support of the Venturists team and others. Projects included some amazing ideas including community herb gardens, exploring bioplastics, health-related rap music, solar-powered car kits, houses for wildlife and upcycled table decorations.

Participate's extensive network of relevant external individuals and organisations such as Responsible Timber, Sewcialise, the Aire Rivers Trust and Calm in the Wild, were integrated into the programme through visits off site, the Dragons' Den and volunteer support for the projects. This meant the Venturists met a variety of people and got a taste of the sorts of environmental roles they might like to do in the future.

A range of important impacts

Being involved in the Venturists has had a number of important impacts for the students involved. The Venturists themselves completed a post-project evaluation which highlighted that they could see changes in themselves through being involved:

Key Area	% improved
Communication	87%
Relationships	87%
Challenges	93%
Resilience	91%



Confidence & Self Esteem	91%
--------------------------	-----

Teachers stressed that confidence, in particular, had been improved through students participating in the Venturists programme. This was particularly evident in the presentations to the Dragons' Den and school assemblies:

'And then I watched them present [their ideas] in an assembly to their whole year group and the children who stood up and spoke so eloquently and passionately about what they were doing, and they cannot wait to put things into practise.'

Claire Light - Curriculum Lead, Beckfoot Heaton Academy

'One [child from our school who took part] was really nervous at first and just didn't really look up. But then by the end [they were] making jokes with people ... And I think that, you know, those types of impacts, as Claire said, every single one of those children in different ways would have benefited personally from the Venturists work.'

Zoe Mawson - Headteacher, Beckfoot Heaton Academy

The representative of Lady Royd Primary said she could also really see the difference in those that participated in the Venturists in terms of willingness to contribute in class, teamwork skills and giving their opinion. She said this was likely due to the attention they got as Venturists, which was new to them at the start, and giving them a voice through the programme:

'They really enjoyed working with Jill and coming back, telling the others what they had done. And the rest of the class were intrigued by, for example, the recycled jars. Those 15 pupils really needed that.'

Representative from Lady Royd Primary

This has also positively impacted friendships and relationships. For example, two children, one of whom struggled with making friends, developed an 'unlikely' friendship through the Venturists and another was able to engage with his cohort after previously struggling:

'There are some children in that session who, for example, spent most of their Year 4 in a very small group away from their class community because they were very overwhelmed and there they were in a whole year group project literally gaining confidence each time they did their role.'

Zoe Mawson – Headteacher, Beckfoot Heaton Academy

And a further student was seen present by his brother, which staff felt was impactful:



'There was one young man as well I remember, and he's from quite a large family and his older brother stood at the door and watched him present his project. It was a really magical moment for me because he just stood still, and he just watched him ... And this is one of the brothers who's a little quieter, and the way his brother was, just so, so very proud of him and he didn't see him at first and then saw him at the very end. And I just thought that was brilliant.'

Claire Light – Curriculum Lead, Beckfoot Heaton Academy

Many of the teachers involved also prioritised sharing the learning from the Venturists across the broader cohort and school community, creating displays and organising assemblies led by the Venturists to showcase their ideas:

'So, it became a whole cohort learning about the Venturists, even though it was just the group of 16 every Friday ... The wildflower boxes and such - they want them across school, so it's not stopped with the project!'

Claire Light – Curriculum Lead, Beckfoot Heaton Academy

The visits to external organisations were also beneficial to the students in seeing the different roles that are available even within one organisation:

'It's so helped as well going in and seeing the different job opportunities. It's not just a bank behind the scenes. You've got your people that are doing the cyber side of it. Then you've got your finance, you've got the recruitment. So it was, yeah, really valuable.'

Aneela Mahmood - Learning Support Assistant and Venturists Lead, Whetley Academy

Why is the Venturists so effective?

Those involved stated a number of key reasons why the Venturists is so effective and impactful.

The structure of the programme, with some key activities such as the Dragons' Den, visits to and from external individuals and organisations and small groups were felt to be instrumental in making the programme work for those that participated. At Beckfoot Heaton Academy, Curriculum Lead Claire Light felt that input from externals was particularly valuable:

'But the other thing is I think it shocked me when we first introduced this, that children really are surprised that other adults who are not staff from school are interested in their success ... So whether it's the people that came in on the Friday to help start making the projects come alive or whether it's the business that we're going to visit together in Leeds with them, I think



they realise that they can believe in themselves because other people are on their side ... And children have commented on it many times ... And I think that that gives children extra confidence and pride that other people are bothered not just their families and not just people who work in schools.'

Claire Light – Curriculum Lead, Beckfoot Heaton Academy

The fact that students have the freedom to choose their project focus and to take ownership was seen as very important in building confidence and developing skills:

'I think it's the fact that they feel like they have the freedom of choice to choose their projects, so they become really involved and really, you know, emotionally connected to it.'

Claire Light – Curriculum Lead, Beckfoot Heaton Academy

'But it's the projects that they're doing. They're taking charge. And Jill's very good like that. You know, she'll sort of give them some ideas, but they take charge of that, you know of their projects'

Aneela Mahmood - Learning Support Assistant and Venturists Lead, Whetley Academy

'And it's that ownership of learning as well because once you own it. You want to do better; you want to give more. They're giving 110% where they might not do in a maths lesson, let's say because they don't get it.'

Suzanna Morrison - Assistant Principle, Whetley Academy

Teachers also spoke of the valuable links between the Venturists programme and the school curriculum, particularly around oracy, through presentations, creativity, and literacy. It also helps develop social skills and relationships, and professionalism, knowledge and understanding of the world and links to the SMEH and PSHE side of the curriculum as well.

In addition to these aspects, the role of Jill as Venturists Lead did not go unnoticed. Teachers were incredibly positive about how she works with the students, building a strong foundation from the start, and how she communicates with them and with the schools she is involved with:

'[Jill is] just so positive, she's great ... You can tell that she brings her knowledge from different experiences to just make it all work ... And, you know, like Claire said the complexity of that group ... She doesn't need to know the children very well to be able to support them how they need to be supported.'

Zoe Mawson – Headteacher, Beckfoot Heaton Academy



Jill and Participate's connections with external organisations were also valued highly for making the Venturists work:

'You know, we can do it as teachers, we can design things like [the Venturists], but it's Jill that is the difference, and also the wider connections because she brought in people based on what the children wanted to do, whereas I do quite a lot of that for our aspiration weeks and things like that, but it takes a lot of time, whereas Jill has already got those connections.'

Zoe Mawson – Headteacher, Beckfoot Heaton Academy

An exciting new partnership!

As well as the excellent work in primary schools, the Npower Business Solutions Foundation funding enabled an exciting new partnership to be developed between Bradford College and ACS Group, who provide businesses with the tools and technology they need to work productively. This is spotlighted below.

Spotlight on Bradford College / ACS Group partnership

The Npower Business Solutions Foundation funding allowed Jill to bring Bradford College and ACS Group together in a new, innovative partnership. Bradford College had participated in a Venturists programme previously, valuing the fact it filled some of the gaps left by National Citizen Services and equivalents which have been disbanded. The ACS Group had volunteered in the community through Participate, had recently set up an Eco-Action Group, and were looking for projects to support on in the wider community. The partnership suited everyone!

Bradford College's Haley Crossley explained they chose to do the Venturists with her tutor group of 9 students all aged 17+ with complex SEN needs, because they are on a pre-supported internship course:

'They are coming towards the end of their time at College and looking to go into a supported internship and then paid employment and because the things that the Venturists do around social action and sustainability it gives very hands on experience and it's the skills that are required for employment as well so we thought that would be an ideal group for it to start with because it feeds directly into their end game really.'

Haley Crosswell - Curriculum Team Leader, Foundation Learning, Bradford College

The project followed the usual Venturists structure but working in partnership meant the Bradford College Venturists and ACS staff could really get to know each other over the project timespan. After exploring environmental issues and trying some upcycling together, the Venturists visited ACS and had a tour and a presentation from Sustainability



Manager Tom Taylor, who explained what they were hoping to achieve through the project:

'We wanted to make the top area of the car park more sustainable and provide staff with somewhere to sit, somewhere to have dinner on a nice day, and just spend time there in general.'

Tom Taylor – Sustainability Manager, ACS Group

Because ACS don't have many homeworkers, the Venturists were able to meet people from across the organisation and *'see how the business looks on a daily basis.'*

After this initial meeting, the Venturists worked on their business ideas and logos, and then pitched them to ACS 'Dragons' who this time visited the College. ACS ensured they had a range of people representing different parts of the organisation, including someone from the Finance Department who quizzed the Venturists on their budgets! The ACS staff were really impressed with the ideas the Venturists had come up with, which clearly met their brief and Strategic Director Liz Stevenson said she was very moved because the students had really considered a bench dedicated to a colleague who had passed away:

'So, in the area that we talked about, we've actually got a bench dedicated to a member of staff that died a few years ago and we mentioned in passing that we want to keep this bench. It's dedicated to a guy called Mark - a colleague of ours that died a few years ago. And they put it as part of their businesses! So, the first business was the company that was going to make a bench, and they called themselves 'benchmark'. So, when that came up on the screen, I started crying because I just wasn't expecting it! ... And it was just the fact that they'd taken this and made it really personal and really cared about what I'd said was really nice.'

Liz Stevenson – Strategic Director, ACS Group

The Venturists also built bird boxes, planted wildflowers and painted walls during the project day and then the garden was officially opened the week after with homemade buns and brownies. The Venturists made individual speeches to representatives from ACS, explaining what they'd got from being involved and thanking them for the opportunity, and ACS had made a plaque with all the Venturists business logos on which was really well-received.

As with the primary schools, the team at Bradford College felt that ownership was a key component of the Venturists' impact:

'... because it's a project the students take ownership for. They plan and organise it all so they own it and then they want it to do well because it's their idea they're expanding on so



they put more effort into it. And it's the sense of achievement that they get from the end results. And it's been them from day dot, it's not something that's been fed to the by anybody.'

Haley Crosswell - Curriculum Team Leader, Foundation Learning, Bradford College

This was reiterated by Tom from ACS who also felt the students seeing the project through from start to finish was powerful for them as well:

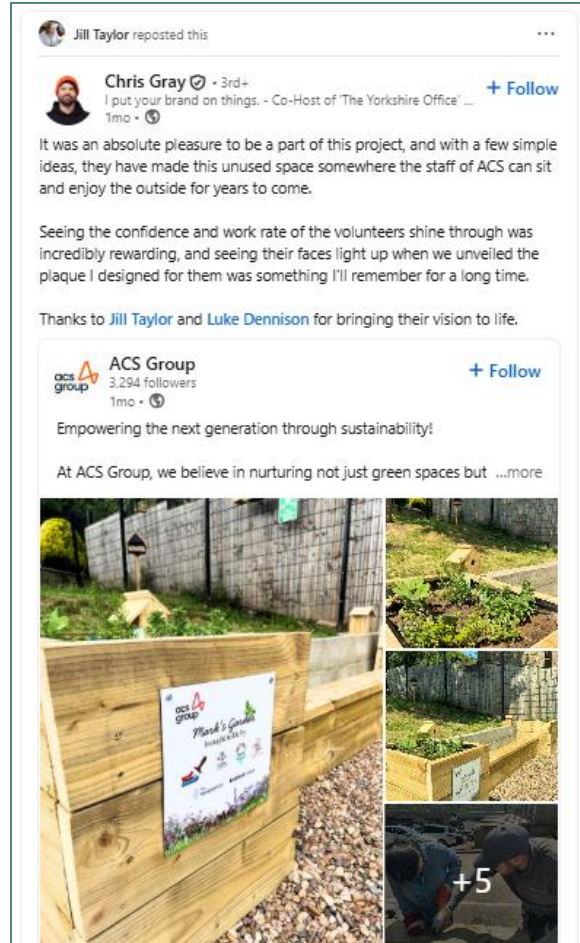
'And the fact they, the students got to see what it was like before, what the area was like before, what the idea was, but then follow that project all the way through to the day when they did the presentation and it was done. And it was like, complete. It was start to finish rather than beginning a project for us and we were going to go and finish it all over the next year or whatever it was. It really was start to finish and I think Jill put a lot of value in that for their, for the students and for them seeing that they've completed it.'

Tom Taylor – Sustainability Manager, ACS Group

The only challenge in the programme was that the time was quite constrained on the side of Bradford College. They have to work around timetables and field trips and it's difficult to find a day they can do regularly for 8 weeks in a row. They would have loved the project day to be spread over two days to add in flexibility and to make it more relaxed.

Impacts

The Venturists programme had positive impacts on all involved. For the Bradford College students, there was evidence of increased confidence and engagement, developing maths and English skills as well as more practical skills such as woodworking and gardening, project management, problem solving and life skills including timekeeping, using the bus and planning the journey, and highlighting different roles they could do in the future:



'There was one student in particular that we've been struggling to engage all the way throughout the year, and they absolutely loved [the Venturists]. They were staying longer because they were so engaged and so looking forward to carrying out what they'd planned. And it was brilliant to see.'

Jade Kelly - SEND Lecturer, Foundation Learning, Bradford College

'And it's not just about the skills they develop and the experience that they get, but it's the employer visits that they go on as well – so getting to see different organisations and the role within them and the types of jobs they do. Just all of it just combined, it just gives so much.'

Haley Crosswell - Curriculum Team Leader, Foundation Learning, Bradford College

Haley explained that the Venturists would also be very relevant for the Skills for Employment groups and, ideally, she would like each group to do it once. Then if multiple groups are participating, they can organise a community practice session to share experiences with each other and groups that might follow in subsequent years. This would extend and expand the learning opportunities and increase the impact of the programme.

The Bradford College team also mentioned the positive impacts of showing the College in a good light and raising the profile within the community with the students getting out and about for example when they are using public transport to get to the project. Haley explained this means people are more likely to work with them and offer them placement opportunities which benefits everyone as the College students are the next generation of employees. They also made sure to share the Venturists programme in good news stories, their summer conference and through the Bradford Council Skills House awards.

ACS explained that they too benefited through the project which they hadn't necessarily expected. They have been trying to find local projects to support so valued the fact that Jill brought the Venturists and Bradford College to them. They also loved what the students had achieved on the green area whilst raising the profile of the Eco-Action group within the organisation and engaging staff in different areas:

'We got some really positive feedback [from staff] which we shared with Jill and it was really good because the staff that went [to the Dragons' Den] were three of our sales people and we weren't expecting them to say yes and they did ... They said they really wanted to do it and they really enjoyed it ... And it also helped Me and Liz because as much as the Eco Action team, which is about around 10 people, knew exactly what was going on at all stages, the rest of the business didn't. So, when it came to actually the day of project on Week 6, the whole business by the end of it knew what was happening and



could see what was happening and why we were doing it and we got some really positive feedback.'

Tom Taylor – Sustainability Manager, ACS Group

Representatives from both ACS and Bradford College were very also positive about Jill's role in making the Venturists a success. Haley explained that Jill's communication was very helpful but also the way she is with the students:

'Jill just gets to know them all and their needs on an individual basis, it's not like a one size fits all approach. She'll find out a little bit about them, so she has a different way with each student from the information we've passed on and what she's acquired herself just from the little bit of time she's worked with them.'

Haley Crosswell - Curriculum Team Leader, Foundation Learning, Bradford College

Liz also complimented Jill on her project management, which really worked for the organisation as they knew they just needed 'to be in the right place when she tells them to be.'

Both organisations said they would like to work together in the future and Haley is hoping all her groups can go to ACS for an employer visit next year. This might also give them the opportunity to visit and maintain the green area.

'It was just a lovely company to be involved with, and they were all such lovely lovely people.'

Jade Kelly - SEND Lecturer, Foundation Learning, Bradford College

When asked about funding, Haley explained the constraints in the Further Education sector at the moment and how they would not have been able to participate in the programme without it because there would have been no money to cover Jill's time.

What could be improved?

The only challenge that was raised in the interviews was that all those involved would like the programme to be available for more students, more regularly and planned in advance. The lack of reliable future funding to cover staff time was seen as a challenge to being able to plan and increase impacts from the programme:

'In the ideal world, you would want all year, so you could work with three different sets of kids. With 16 children in a big school like ours you're only scratching the surface and there's so many needs. Literally we you could have filled that Venturists tenfold ... And if you knew you were going to do it more than one year you could say, 'OK, we'll take these with the most



need and then next year we can have a mix of children in there.’ ... I just wish we could do it with the younger children and then watch them grow through the whole school.’

Suzanna Morrison - Assistant Principle, Whetley Academy

‘One of the challenges we have is because we’ve got 90 children in a year group and ideally I would love to get to a point where everyone could be involved in a project like the Venturists during their time at primary school. Because I know we choose particular things for particular children, but actually things like this really every child would benefit from at different levels and so I do I really feel a bit uncomfortable that we can’t.’

Zoe Mawson – Headteacher, Beckfoot Heaton Academy

Concluding remarks

This report is based on data from interviews with 10 people involved with the Npower Business Solutions Foundation funded Venturists in the period January to July 2025. These included teaching staff across three schools and Bradford College, volunteers and external organisations, as well as a light touch social media review.

There were some clear themes across the interviews, which highlighted the impacts of the Venturists programme on those involved:

- Over the 6 months of the Npower Business Solutions Foundation funded programme, the Venturists had an impressive reach in terms of numbers of students involved, external organisations engaged and even an award nomination!
- The funding meant the programme reached those that needed it most – all the students were identified as having some educational difficulties relating to e.g., social, emotional and mental health needs, communication, confidence, self-esteem.
- The exciting and varied programme led to big impacts, especially around building confidence, skills, relationships, leadership and engagement in class.
- The structure of the programme, the ownership and freedom of choice students had, Participate’s networks of external individuals and organisations and Jill’s excellent ways of working meant it was very effective in achieving its aims.
- An exciting new partnership was successfully developed with Bradford College students and ACS Group, resulting in a fantastic sustainability garden.
- All involved would like to reach more children through the Venturists but a lack of reliable future funding to cover staff time was seen as a challenge to being able to plan and increase impacts from the programme.

