

Awakening our Land

Our 2026 - 2029 Strategy

Ernest Cook
TRUST



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Our land is our greatest asset. It sustains us, it teaches us,
and it offers endless opportunities for learning.
This is the time to awaken our land.

Ed Ikin, Chief Executive



Learning that's rooted
in our own land - that is
the heart of this strategy.

Nature works with an irrepressible momentum, awakening the land, and awakening our senses.

Our strategy offers the same possibility for our land over the next three years. We hold over 9,000 hectares across the country and we have nurtured and tended this land for decades. But these familiar, enduring landscapes have the possibility to brim with new life if we awaken their potential for learning.

The Context

It's easy to say that we've never needed this hope more, but it feels especially true right now. We study stressors in the natural world, but there's a convergence of stressors in the lives of young people that we've never seen before.

At the very time that young people need the most resilience and confidence, to face a volatile future and uncertain career prospects, their wellbeing is being degraded. Whether you

want to blame encroaching technology or screen time, a mental health epidemic, or failings in the systems to support them, there's no denying that young people's wellbeing is under threat.

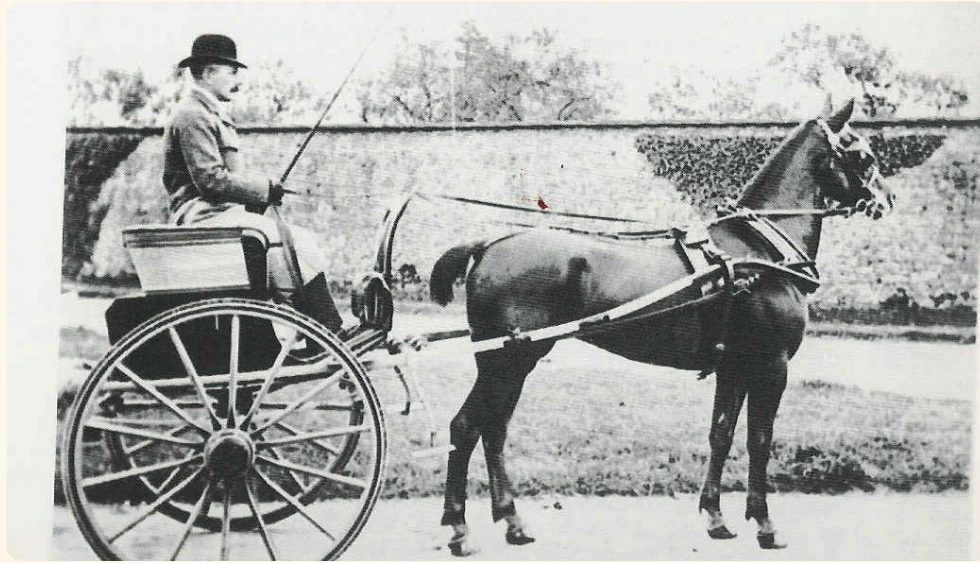
The Path Forward

But, like the annual return of the seasons, change can manifest surprisingly quickly. And outdoor learning has an extraordinary ability to awaken potential. The ability to learn, willingness to engage and interact, and enthusiasm for the future can all emerge in new environments. Suddenly, there's the possibility to thrive.

We have always nurtured land and learning side by side, but this strategy is the moment we awaken our land to its fullest learning potential. This means stronger learning and career pathways on our land. Deeper connections and relationships with partners around our estates. And new possibilities for innovation, research and diversification.

Learning that's rooted in our own land and places - that is the heart of this strategy.

These familiar, enduring landscapes have the possibility to brim with new life if we awaken their potential for learning.



Our heritage

The Ernest Cook Trust has a rich 75-year history as both an educational charity and a landowner. Our founder is a relatively unknown philanthropist, but he was a pioneer in the conservation of country estates and rural traditions. He was rooted in the land and he had strong beliefs about the value of rural ways of life.

Over the years, the Trust has managed thousands of acres across the country, including land left by Ernest Cook and new estates bought by and gifted to the Trust over the years. And thanks to this stewardship, we have cultivated enough income to be a meaningful grant funder and outdoor learning provider.

Now, we are rediscovering our roots - awakening the potential of our land and grounding ourselves in our places. Exactly as Ernest Cook imagined and hoped to do.

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Our mission today

Our mission today is to help young people cultivate deep-rooted connections with the land, through outdoor learning and experiences in nature. We deeply believe that land can deliver multiple benefits with a unique ability to enrich both lives and livelihoods.

Through our learning programmes, collaborative partnerships, and progressive land management, we are working to change the way people across the UK understand and experience land and nature.

We believe that the land is for all of us. But we know that not everyone is starting from the same place in their experiences on land, so our hope is to make it accessible and inclusive for anyone to explore the outdoors. Our work aims to grow supportive environments around young people, their schools and communities.

Our vision for tomorrow

At the Ernest Cook Trust, we see a future where land and lives enrich each other. A future where anyone can find their place, purpose and potential through connections to thriving land.

We know that our strategy does not exist in isolation. As an educational charity rooted in the land, we are part of a wider landscape that includes young people, rural society, farming, and environmental organisations. Our strategy is in many ways a response to challenges across these sectors, and our land is our greatest asset to meet them.

In doing this, we will continue our own learning journey. We already work with experts in outdoor learning, land management and farming to help us make the greatest impact and we are lucky to be part of a wider community that shares learning and innovation so naturally.

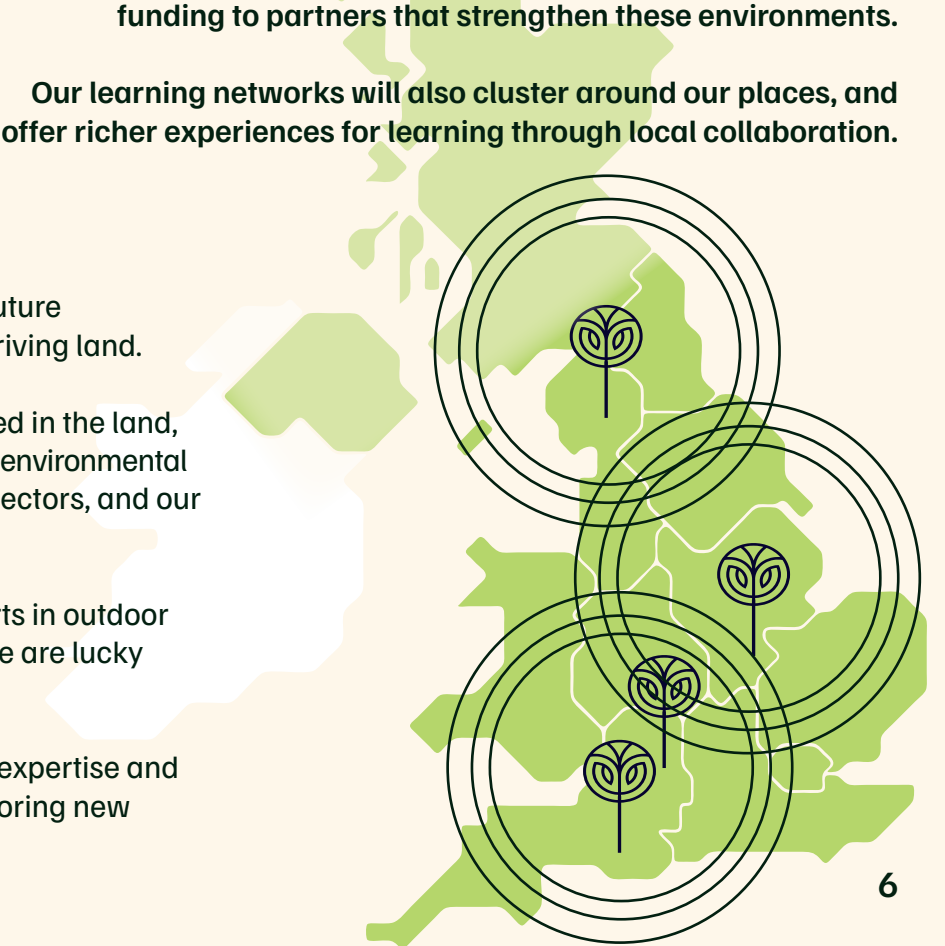
If you share our vision and want to awaken your own land's potential, or if you have expertise and learnings to support this work, please get in touch - we are always interested in exploring new partnerships and cultivating new connections.

The importance of place

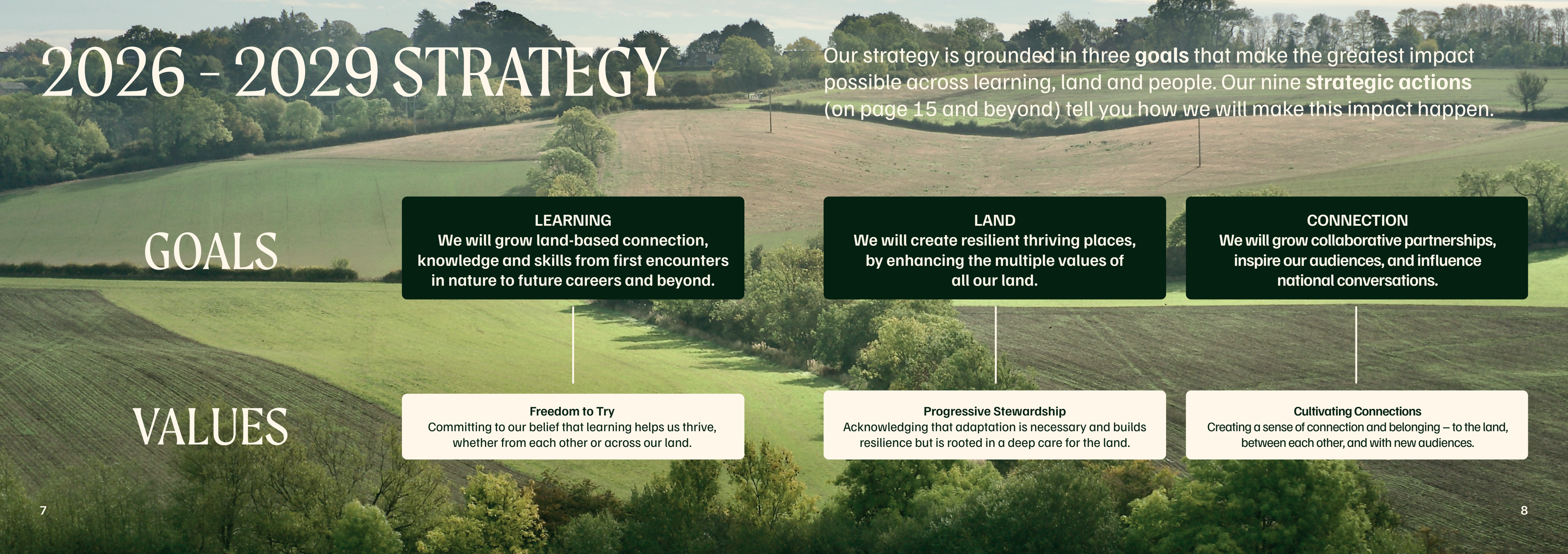
This strategy offers a new perspective on our places and the role our land plays in our learning and educational work. Our outdoor learning and land-based skills programmes will now grow and nurture deeper relationships with the schools, organisations and communities that surround our places. This means more multi-year relationships and a focus on deeper connections.

For grant making, this means exploring funding capability and capacity in the ecosystem of our places and supporting specific needs in our environments, as well as testing longer-term funding to partners that strengthen these environments.

Our learning networks will also cluster around our places, and offer richer experiences for learning through local collaboration.



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2026 – 2029 STRATEGY

Our strategy is grounded in three **goals** that make the greatest impact possible across learning, land and people. Our nine **strategic actions** (on page 15 and beyond) tell you how we will make this impact happen.

GOALS

LEARNING
We will grow land-based connection, knowledge and skills from first encounters in nature to future careers and beyond.

LAND
We will create resilient thriving places, by enhancing the multiple values of all our land.

CONNECTION
We will grow collaborative partnerships, inspire our audiences, and influence national conversations.

VALUES

Freedom to Try
Committing to our belief that learning helps us thrive, whether from each other or across our land.

Progressive Stewardship
Acknowledging that adaptation is necessary and builds resilience but is rooted in a deep care for the land.

Cultivating Connections
Creating a sense of connection and belonging – to the land, between each other, and with new audiences.

LEARNING

We will grow land-based connection, knowledge and skills from first encounters in nature to future careers and beyond.

We are an educational charity at our heart, and our number one goal is to cultivate sustained, land-based learning pathways, which are shaped by the landscapes in which they exist and where they are delivered.

This is led by our deep-rooted belief that learning from the land supports personal growth, learning engagement and a sense of belonging. And this goal signals our commitment to growing learning opportunities that develop both rural skills on the land with clear pathways into green careers, and an interest in learning about the land through curriculum-aligned and experiential learning, research, and sector partnerships.

For the first time, our learning delivery programmes, grant making and partnerships will integrate around our places, whilst investing in the future of land-based learning through our sector collaborations.





LAND

We will create resilient thriving places, by enhancing the multiple values of all our land.

This goal empowers us to reimagine the full value of our land and activate every one of our estates for learning, nature recovery and wider impact.

We have always valued and nurtured the land, whilst supporting education and outdoor learning, but for the first time this strategy sets out our ambition to fully connect our land and learning offerings, so that learning shapes land management and land management deepens learning. We will do this in collaboration with our tenant farmers and their businesses - supporting financial resilience, innovation, and diversification, especially across outdoor learning.

We will go from siloed approaches in our land and learning work that pursue different opportunities in isolation, to a thriving ecosystem of land and learning that transforms how we know and experience our estates.

CONNECTION

We will grow collaborative partnerships, inspire our audiences, and influence national conversations.

Our vision is of a future where anyone can find their place, purpose and potential through connections to thriving land – and this goal reflects how we make that possible not just on our land but beyond our boundaries.

Whether they're communities around our landholdings, our learning sector peers, our farming tenants and colleagues, or new partners that share our ambition for a thriving future, we want to connect with wider audiences to help awaken the potential of our land and to learn through connection and collaboration.

We want to go from small but committed audiences, to a wider reach that uncovers new pathways and partnerships – both to grow the Trust's profile and to support our networks in their own brilliant work.



STRATEGIC ACTIONS

We have intentionally not grouped these actions by our goals - they all cross-pollinate and support each other. But we recognise that these actions take place on our land, beyond our boundaries, and in our culture.

On our land

- 1** Develop immersive outdoor and farm-based learning, rooted in local partnerships and landscapes.
- 2** Open coherent land-based learning and career pathways across all our estates and beyond.
- 3** Commit to targeted land management led by the landscape, that offers the greatest opportunities for learning, community impact and nature.
- 4** Invest financially and culturally in local impact and our communities on and around our land.

Beyond our boundaries

- 5** Cultivate stronger connections and capacity across land and learning sectors.
- 6** Grow our influence where we can offer value and expertise.
- 7** Diversify our income streams and investment approaches both on and off our land.

In our culture

- 8** Create a culture of insight, innovation and efficiency.
- 9** Support our people with collective learning and adaptive ways of working.



1 Develop immersive outdoor and farm-based learning

As an educational charity and landowner, we support lifelong learning opportunities for all. But we also exist to cultivate and nurture a love of learning in young people especially. And today's system is failing young people.

We see the evidence of this in a national school system that is struggling to support children with special educational needs, disabilities, or unmet mental health needs. We feel the impact in soaring levels of absenteeism and school avoidance. We know the challenge is reflected by the nearly 1 million NEET young people (Not in Education, Employment or Training).

So our strategic actions around learning for young people - immersive outdoor learning and pathways for green careers - aim to address these challenges directly and with tangible impact in young people's lives.

Young people, like all of us, need to find where they belong. So it's not just about taking education outdoors, but awakening young people's potential and power through transformative learning experiences on and with the land.

88%
of teachers are seeing
greater mental health
needs in their students

1.7 million
children identified with SEND
(Special Educational Needs &
Disabilities)

What we'll do...

Focus on personal development for children and young people encountering challenge in their lives.

Support engagement in learning beyond the classroom, with curriculum-aligned programmes.

Develop CPD opportunities for teachers which foster whole-school approaches.

The change we hope to see...

- Young people are learning essential life skills.
- Teachers and practitioners are developing confidence, skills and habits in taking learning outdoors.
- The Ernest Cook Trust is deepening our understanding of how our work creates the conditions for learning.

2 Open land-based learning and career pathways



What we'll do...

Awaken our land as practical learning spaces linked to real land management and enterprise opportunities.

Support routes into green careers through practical tasters, work experience and student research placements.

Create progressive pathways in youth voice and leadership.

The change we hope to see...

- Young people are gaining confidence and capability in practice, and learning interdisciplinary skills to take into their futures.
- Wider communities are forming a connection to their local nature-based economy.
- The Ernest Cook Trust is deepening our insight into what helps or hinders young people's participation.

3 Commit to targeted land management led by the landscape

What we'll do...

Define and cultivate the strategic role of each of our estates, through Whole Estate Plans.

Integrate the multiple values of our land holdings into everything we do.

Embed place-making principles into our development projects of different scales.

Cultivate environmentally responsible practices across our land, learning and properties.

The change we hope to see...

- Our estates are delivering on their specific strategic objectives.
- Young people are better able to access our land for learning and in a greater variety of ways.
- The Ernest Cook Trust is integrating land and learning, in what we offer and how we manage our estates.



4 Invest in local impact on and around our land

What we'll do...

Engage the local community with our land and learning through improved access and inclusion.

Grow trust in our placemaking approaches and development plans with community engagement.

Support the development of rural economies, infrastructure and communities.

Pilot a youth-led, intergenerational, land management partnership programme on our land.

The change we hope to see...

- Communities on and around our land feel pride in their local landscape and can describe the benefits of better access, nature and habitat preservation, and rural development.
- Young people are empowered to contribute to the future of land in their local landscape.
- The Ernest Cook Trust is seen as a credible and trusted part of the community.

Why nature matters to us...

It is easy to compartmentalise and describe separate relationships: people and nature, farming and nature, when the reality is more complex, more intriguing and richer in possibilities.

As a species, we evolved in nature. Many of our inherent behaviours and abilities were honed through existing and thriving in biodiversity over millennia. This is one of our fundamental pillars of outdoor learning and it's no surprise that some young people thrive as soon as they start learning outside.

Rather than nature as the 'other', alternative learning environment, perhaps it's the classroom that should be seen as the abstract, less obvious environment to learn. And the nature itself matters. Research shows that spending time in more biodiverse environments such as species-rich meadows or woodland can have additional health and wellbeing benefits.

The relationship between thriving nature and successful farming is also increasingly understood. Healthy hedgerows, headlands and woodlands around fields provide pollinators and percolate storm surges. Healthy soil biodiversity increases nutrient availability, suppresses pests and increases water-holding 'field capacity'.

Our commitment to nature is a commitment to people, and a commitment to farming. Enriching our habitats creates better places to teach, and to learn from. Connecting and improving our habitats across our farmed landscapes increases the opportunities for nature to provide services and benefits to our farming. Our approach to nature is integrated with our mission, not apart from it and the benefits are clear.

5 Cultivate stronger connections and capacity across land and learning sectors

What we'll do...

Empower our partners on farms and in schools to champion outdoor and farm-based learning themselves.

Invest in organisations within the wider ecosystem who are delivering excellence in land-based learning for under-represented groups.

Scope and build strategic partnerships to support nature recovery and climate work with links to learning outcomes.

The change we hope to see...

- Our partnerships and networks are creating new learning opportunities, sharing insights, and growing sector capability.
- Young people are supported through wider networks on the land and in their communities.
- The Ernest Cook Trust is opening up new opportunities for us to convene and connect across the sector.



6 Grow our influence in areas where we can offer value and expertise

What we'll do...

Grow an ecosystem of partners and ambassadors with a shared vision for the future of land and learning.

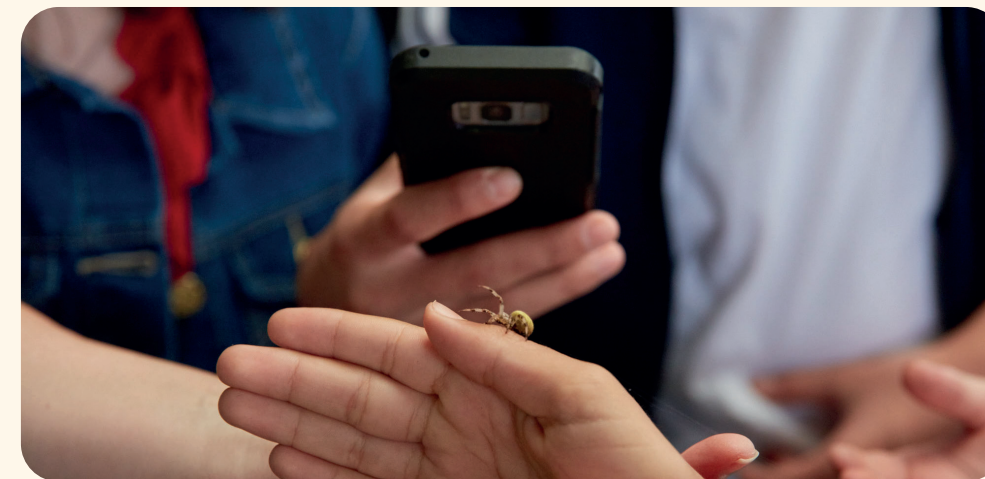
Share expertise and convene diverse voices at sector events and our own opportunities.

Define our advocacy and influencing ambitions to support unmet needs in our sectors.

We see the value of diversity in nature, people, and even our own health - wherever it is found it makes us stronger. And we want to help cultivate diversity of thought and expertise across all our work and with all our networks. Cross-pollinating our different areas of work offers the chance to awaken new potential and opportunities.

And as an organisation committed to learning, we know that we have a lot to learn from our peers and partners. We are lucky to be part of a community rich in expertise and experience, and one of our ambitions is to support and nurture these connections.

We already know the power these connections have, seen through networks like our incredible **OWL Collaboration**. And we're excited to develop our new **Growing Horizons** partnership in 2026 - 2029.



The change we hope to see...

- Our audiences and communities are engaging with the important discussions around young people's life chances and futures in today's context.
- Young people are supported in their advocacy and social action through our reach and platform.
- The Ernest Cook Trust is known as a thoughtful, intentional expert voice in our sectors.

7 Diversify our income streams and investment approaches

What we'll do...

Review our investments and income streams to diversify our business opportunities and grow financial sustainability.

Help accelerate innovation and diversification across our farms and landholdings.

Seek new income streams from nature markets and take action to further embed environmental considerations into our investments and grant making.

The change we hope to see...

- Our farmers are supported in diversification and innovation, and growing greater financial resilience through new income streams.
- Young people are supported to thrive through funding opportunities and focused programmes, on and off our land.
- The Ernest Cook Trust is strengthening our own financial sustainability whilst reinforcing our work, values, and credible influence.



8 Create a culture of insight, innovation and efficiency.

& 9 Support our people with collective learning and adaptive ways of working

These two actions support each other directly - we know that our ambitions are only possible with more focus on insight and innovation, but we also know that our people are at the heart of our impact and success. They are what make the Ernest Cook Trust a welcoming place to work and an expert partner in learning and land management. As we transform our ways of working and grow more efficient practices, we will also engage our teams in a shared learning and development process.

By empowering our teams with new training and tools, we want to awaken the opportunity for them to step outside their own boundaries and bring their expertise into new fields. Whether that's an outdoor estate manager with valuable learning connections to share, or one of our core support team who wants to develop their own land-based skills, we are a complex ecosystem and we want everyone to thrive.

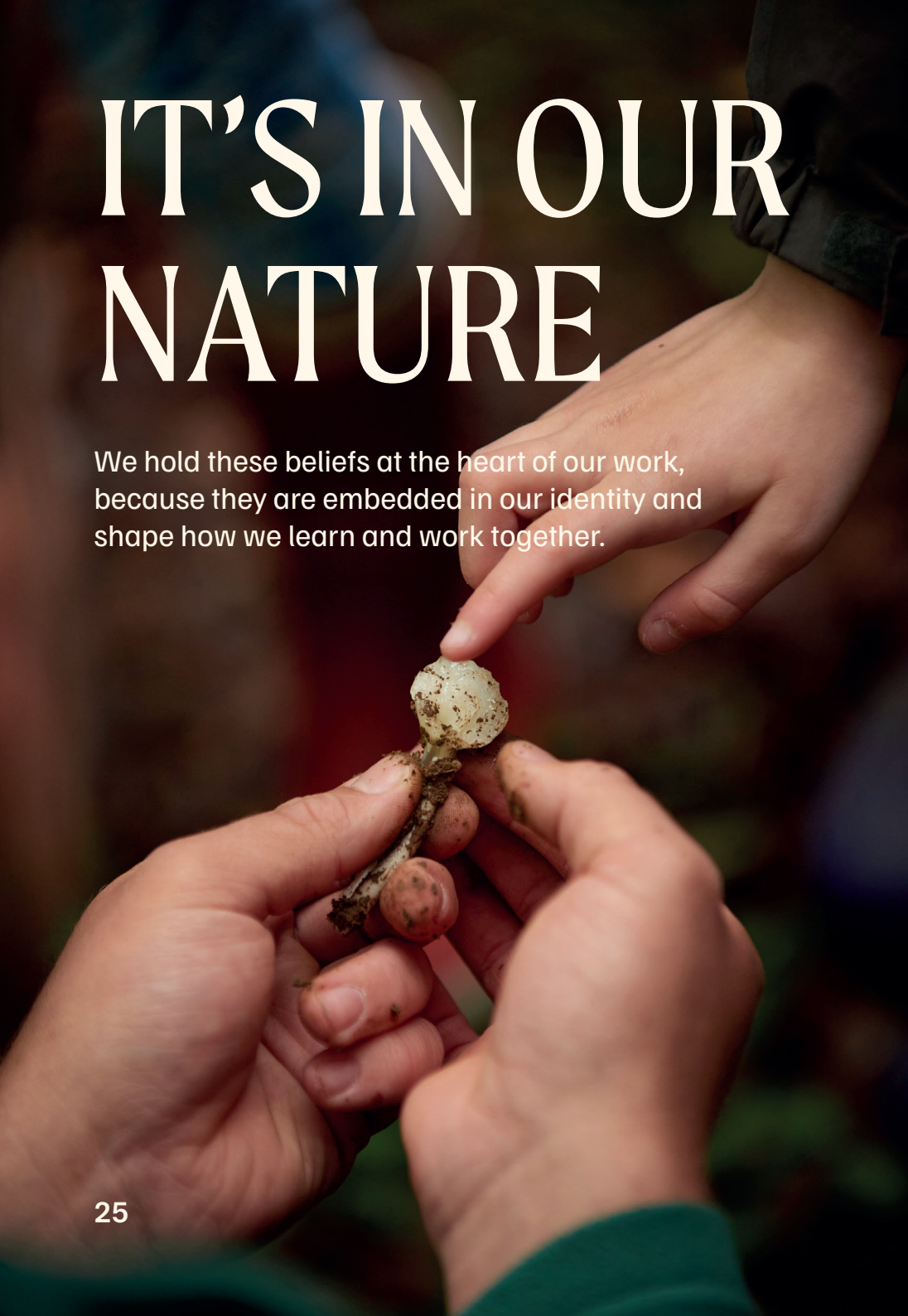
What we'll do...

- **Transform our ways of working and efficiency with a focus on insight.**
- **Support our people through this organisational and ways-of-working change.**
- **Grow financial sustainability for ourselves, our communities and networks.**
- **Empower teams with the relevant training, tool kits and platforms.**

The change we hope to see...

- Our people are engaging with changes that help drive efficiency, better decision making and sustainable ways of working.
- The Ernest Cook Trust is benefitting from the collective expertise and knowledge of all our people.





IT'S IN OUR NATURE

We hold these beliefs at the heart of our work, because they are embedded in our identity and shape how we learn and work together.

LIFELONG LEARNING

Growing a learning mindset throughout our work

Learning is at the heart of land management and farming - you will rarely meet a more innovative group than British farmers. And we see cycles of learning and adaption in nature all the time.

So as a learning charity, we want to commit to embedding this mindset across all of our work. This means seeing everything we do as a learning opportunity and reconsidering how we understand value and success. It means prioritising the opportunity to learn. And recognising that meaningful change rarely follows a simple or predictable path.

A learning mindset will show up in our work by:

- Asking incisive questions to guide our learning, not just our delivery
- Building in regular time to step back in teams, with partners, and with young people to reflect on what's working, what isn't and why
- Using what we learn to adapt what we do next

This way, we can reach a place where learning shapes land management, and land management deepens learning.

We also want our partners to join us on this journey. Please reach out if you want to find out more, share ideas, or have an opportunity to explore together. As in nature, we adapt and learn better together.

LAND IS FOR ALL OF US

Equity, diversity, inclusion and youth empowerment in our strategy

We know that farming and green careers are not always seen as inclusive or diverse places for young people. But we truly believe that anyone and everyone can find their place, purpose or potential on the land.

An inclusive working culture is vital to empower our teams and partners, helping us deliver our best for people and land.

The Ernest Cook Trust will embed this in our strategy by:

- Creating and maintaining a workplace that supports diverse ways of thinking
- Encouraging innovation in our colleagues and partners
- Welcoming people who haven't typically seen themselves in green careers or working in our sectors

Youth empowerment is at the core of our inclusion work, as we strive to lay pathways for young people - not to just benefit from the land, but to help shape and decide its future.

Some of our specific actions to support this include:

- Creating progressive pathways in leadership
- Growing more opportunities for our Youth Advisory Board
- Creating a framework for youth voice and influence

FROM THE LAND ENRICHED

Cultivating nature recovery, climate resilience and intentional investment

We witness carefully-balanced feedback loops throughout the natural world. And we believe that our investments should have a similar integration with our values as a landowner and learning charity. One of our ongoing priorities is how we embed values-led grant making and investment and how we enable innovation to enhance our assets.

For grant making, this includes a commitment to exploring how lived experience informs our decisions and diversifying our grant streams in response to local need.

For our investments, this means an active reflection on how our portfolio supports the environment and models best practice.

One of our greatest areas of investment is in the natural world and environment - guided by our **Nature Recovery & Climate Strategy**.

Some of our key actions in this area will be:

- Projects that create, enhance and reconnect habitats, build soil health, and enhance water quality
- New learning opportunities from our work on nature and climate
- Building strategic partnerships to help nature thrive and support enhanced learning outcomes

If you have expertise to share or advice to seek regarding investments, please get in touch.



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