

Groundbreaking programme gives Tom a route into conservation.

A Dorset charity which supports young people with additional needs to transition into adulthood has helped one of its young learners find his 'dream' conservation role at Hengistbury Head.



[Autism Unlimited's](#) Futures programme, based in Manor Road, Christchurch, empowers people aged 18-25 to fulfil their potential and become active in their local communities, through learning, work placements, employability skills and supported housing practice.

Tom Comer, 25, from Christchurch, joined Futures in November 2021, after leaving college.

Tom has Noonan Syndrome which has affected his growth, movement, vision, and hearing.

His Futures Coach Matt Egan said: "When Tom first joined us, I learned he was passionate about insects and the outdoors and regularly worked alongside his dad in his gardening business. But he lacked confidence, and he and his family needed our support to help him find that confidence.

"Tom had qualifications and a huge amount of knowledge, but he was also very shy, and his stutter made him feel awkward and unheard. He would often just give up and say: "Oh, forget about it!" when he couldn't get his words out.

“I helped him to stop, think about what he wanted to say and then say it, and soon he was chatting and starting his own conversations.

“He also started catching the bus to and from home to Futures and the gym and taking part in supervised overnight stays at Futures.

“Then we arranged for him to start going to Hengistbury Head as a Countryside Volunteer - and he hasn't looked back.”

Hengistbury Head is a Special Area of Conservation and home to many plants, birds, and insects, some of which are rare and critically endangered.

Tom said: “I love nature and my time at Hengistbury Head is giving me the chance to at last do conservation work, which has been my dream.

“Every day is different and a new opportunity.

“Futures is letting me see what it is like to live a more independent life as a ‘normal adult’ and follow a career in conservation.”

Phil Wetherell is a Ranger at Hengistbury Head with BCP's Environment/Parks and Bereavement Services.

He said: ‘Tom has been a great addition to our volunteer group and is very popular with all the volunteers.

“He is very punctual and hard-working, giving 100% at all the conservation tasks we undertake, including clearing gorse, removing Parrot's feather, a very invasive plant growing in the ponds, and Ragwort, a prolific seeding plant that would pose a risk to our cattle if not removed from our grazing fields.”

Tom's mum and dad Jane and Hugh Comer said Futures has opened up a: “whole new world” to their son.

Hugh said: “Futures seems to have got a hold on what makes Tom tick, showing him how he can live, when he hasn't had that before.

“He is aware the planet is in trouble and wants to get in there and help and he can now see ways he can do that.”

Jane agreed: “He is beginning to grow into himself and his potential. Futures has shown him a way to get to his dreams. Without Futures I don't know where we would be.”

Futures students have gone on to secure placements, paid employment, and careers in a variety of business sectors, including retail, hospitality, and engineering.

Autism Unlimited CEO Siún Cranny said: “We have created Futures to prepare young people effectively for adulthood by working with them to take control of their lives and achieve their aspirations.

“Tom is a living, breathing example of the success Futures can bring.

“We are looking forward to watching him thrive and to helping even more young people reach their future potential.”

Autism Unlimited is now accepting new applications for Futures. For more details contact email: futures@autism-unlimited.org or phone: 01202 485305

Ends

Picture captions – Tom Cromer, seen here with his coach Matt Egan working at Hengistbury Head, is the latest young adult to find a successful path into adulthood with Autism Unlimited’s Futures.

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