



**Plan Bee**  
**Harrogate, UK**  
**VocaLink**

**BIG Biodiversity Challenge Award category: Pollinator Award**

**Project overview**

In 2016, VocaLink heard of the decline in honey bee populations in the UK. Without insect pollination, up to 75% of the crops we take for granted would suffer some form of decrease in productivity. As a responsible business, we wanted to do something to tackle this environmental issue head on. We aim to be a catalyst for positive change in the environment around us. Our office in Harrogate is lucky enough to be surrounded by a woodland walk area. So we thought, why not make the most of this habitat as a site for an apiary (bee hive)?

The opportunity was a no brainer: offer our employees the chance to train as beekeepers and help to restore the UK's bee population to its former levels by creating viable ecosystems on its premises, delivering on our vision to champion innovation in society and inspire the next generation.

**What were the biodiversity conditions on site, prior to the enhancement?**

Our location in the North Yorkshire Dales means that we had great biodiversity conditions on site to get us started. Many of the plants and flowers required to nurture a new ecosystem were already present in the woodland walk area around us.

**Were there any specific conditions that led to you carrying out this work?**

Despite the thriving wilderness that surrounds us in Harrogate, we were aware that bee levels were in decline in our local area. We wanted to play our part in restoring these population levels and knew that work needed to take place to enhance the habitat at our Harrogate site. Through this work we could help to restore biodiversity in the surrounding areas, too.

**What were the biodiversity measures taken?**

'Plan Bee' is a first for VocaLink and is a big departure from our normal business practice. A significant amount of time and money went into



*The existing woodland walk area, available for VocaLink staff to use, was the perfect spot to accommodate the first apiary.*



ensuring that we engaged with the right people along the way to get it right. Our employees have played a critical role in the delivery of this initiative, volunteering their own time to this great cause.

First, we set about researching best practice for the installation of a bee hive in the grounds of a corporate facility, ensuring that we would not harm the existing biodiversity of the area. Research was also completed to ensure that the introduction of a colony of honey bees would not inadvertently decimate populations of existing bees elsewhere in the local area.

We spoke to local experts in the field, engaging with the Harrogate branch of the Royal Horticultural Society to get their advice on which plants and flowers to add to our existing selection. Seeds were sown to grow in tandem with the installation of the colony in mid-June 2016. We also collaborated with Harrogate & Ripon Bee Keeping Association, a registered charity, and Arcadian Apiaries Ltd, so that the colony of our first hive had the very best chance of thriving. Our partnership with HRBKA means that our links to the local corporate community will flourish. Plan Bee will also contribute to DEFRA's National Pollinator 10-year Strategy.

This initiative is replicable. Once successfully installed, further apiaries can be installed at suitable locations at other Vocalink sites. Roof-tops, other wooded areas and shrubberies of a suitable size can all accommodate apiaries. Plan Bee is also ecologically valuable in the habitat created. Bees can spread and pollinate existing woodland, farmland and rural green spaces that surround the Harrogate site, providing food for birds, bats and other wildlife. This in turn will encourage the Queen Bee to keep reproducing.



*The team of volunteers were fully involved, literally from the ground up! The stand for the apiary was built by a member of the Facilities Management team, from an old pallet; Sustainability was a key driver straight from the outset.*



### How would you best describe the project?

The Plan Bee Project is a key deliverable for Vocalink and is one of the ways that we work to make a positive impact on the environments that our business operates in. This project has been a great opportunity to develop our employees and come together to give back to our community.

### Further information

Installation began with the woodland walk area first being prepared to accept a beehive. We wanted the area to be as natural a state as possible so a space was cleared by Harrogate volunteers and a stand for the hive was built out of an old recycled wooden pallet. The hive was delivered and with advice from HRBKA, and Arcadian Apiaries Ltd, the hive was installed along with the entrance reducer and internal frames. The colony was introduced and regular maintenance of the bees began.

Despite a delay caused by the unseasonably wet and damp weather, we've been able to introduce a colony of 20,000 bees to the Harrogate woodland walk and invest in a team of keen volunteers to safely manage the hive's health & growth. The volunteers also introduced more plants and flowers that would further help pollination. The existing wildflowers, such as bluebells, will flourish due to the introduction of the first hive and the colony of bees which will pollinate them.

Lots of new lessons have been learnt along the way however, as we'd followed guidance from the beekeeping experts, I doubt if anything would be done differently if we were to duplicate the project – we'd still take advice from the experts in order to give the project the best chance of success. Bring on the first honey harvest!

But we're not stopping there. We have carried out further work on the woodland walk area to ensure that the hive is situated in the best possible position and an area has been cleared to ensure that our volunteer bee keepers have space to walk around the hive. A second apiary has been installed to accommodate the hive as it grows and swarms, to look for a new home.



*Beekeepers in action! The installation of the first apiary at Harrogate has offered the opportunity for staff to grow & learn and also help support a key environmental cause.*

### What was your personal motivation for carrying out the enhancement?

The apiary installation provided a fantastic opportunity to take an idea from a colleague and, through a process of building a team of keen volunteers and taking advice from experts in the field, take it through to completion. It's been a true team effort and an excellent example of collaboration, a key behaviour within Vocalink and something I'm very proud to have been involved in.