

Project Saplings

North London, London Borough of Haringey

Thames Water/ Ambitious About Autism and TreeHouse School/ Arcadis / A host of volunteers

BIG Biodiversity Challenge Award Category: *Community Engagement*

Project overview

Thames Water granted (on a peppercorn lease in 2014) a plot of land to TreeHouse School (operated by the charity Ambitious about Autism (AAA)). Project Saplings, created a safe space for people with autism aged 4 to 25 to learn and practice horticulture and benefit from ecotherapy while managing and enhancing the biodiversity of the plot.

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

The plot is a small self-seeded woodland on abandoned tennis courts (in the 80's) with bramble encroachment and some grassland. While it is a SINC and designated as Significant Open Land, the condition of the habitat was poor due to lack of management, non-native invasive species and fly tipping over the fence (it was not used by the public). The ground flora layer lacked in diversity, dominated by bramble and ivy. Considerable amounts of dumped green waste, including non-native species and fly tipping and considerable amounts of bagged waste from dog walkers.

What were the reasons behind this project ?

Thames Water want to contribute to and engage with local communities providing access to TW land, where possible. TreeHouse want to provide a safe space for pupils to get the health, wellbeing, educational and therapeutic benefits from nature they are often denied due to the challenges of using public space. Future employment is often not considered a viable option for many of these children but by creating an organic horticulture resource with exposure to biodiversity, they can manage the garden and the wildlife habitats with support, equipping pupils with learning and valuable skills while receiving the benefits of ecotherapy.



Site before with bramble and non native species regeneration



Pupils sowing seed with corporate volunteers and discovering frogs, snails and newts

What were the biodiversity measures taken?

An Ecological Management Plan and habitat creation, written by Arcadis in 2016, was implemented, prior to starting the works on the garden creation, followed by yearly visits and updates. The garden became operational in 2017.

Measures included: opening of the tree canopy and removing non-native species to allow growth of ground layer fauna, rotational cutting of the grassland to improve the habitat for reptiles, removal of 50% of dense bramble, creation of log and brash piles, erection of 3 bird and 6 bat boxes, localised permeability in the boundary to facilitate access for wildlife. Additional measures, not in the EMP, included: reusing pruning offcuts to create dead hedging, creation of a willow carr, successful applications to Woodland Trust and Kew 'Grow Wild' to enable installation of native hedging at the boundaries and pockets of wildflowers, removal of epicormic growth and dense ivy from trees where ivy was affecting tree health, mulching with wet newspaper and bark (donated from local tree surgeons) to improve condition, compost creation and creation of a boggy area and additional brash and grass piles. One person from TreeHouse School has been identified to have an overview of site management and key members of staff record actions in a shared electronic file. Enthusiasm has spread to the main school grounds where a sensory garden and a wildlife pond has been created and the soft estate management regime altered to enhance biodiversity. A pilot social enterprise scheme was initiated (with Organiclea) growing vegetables and flowers and selling them at school. Pupils are learning no dig horticulture, creating their own compost, companion planting and making leaf mould and water is provided by water butt collection. Activities for next term include creation of 'insect hotels' a hedgehog shelter, more reptile shelters, increasing wet/pond area, board for recording wildlife observations additional native planting for pollinators and creation of more explanatory signage.



Mining bee on hogweed, small blue butterfly on bindweed, brash piles, bat boxes and willow carr creation before and after



Wildlife pond on the main school site with log piles from decaying trees, shed with water butts, wildlife corridors and re-used material for the insect hotel



Further information

Achieved largely through *pro bono* consultancy and resources, with some external funding and lots of volunteer effort. Corporate volunteers are charged for their time on site. Pupils, volunteers and community all benefit from access to previously inaccessible nature, the wider community are engaging through volunteering and over 50's use the site. Measures taken so far have increased biodiversity, having seen frogs, newts, nesting birds, a number of invertebrates and a very happy family of foxes. Management is a lifetime project for the school, there are regular visits from professional ecologists and arboriculturists to monitor the management and continue enhancing the area. The work is innovative as it is multifaceted and has high ambitions for a disadvantaged group. It is highly replicable and we hope to support others embarking on this initiative. At the planning stage we were unprepared for the response from the community who were initially fearful of the perceived disruption caused by autistic children with behavioural problems. Now pupils are using the space, the change in community perception has manifested through positive comments and interest from passers-by with requests from a range of organisations and individuals as to how they can get involved.

Project Team

Organisation : Julia Lampard co-ordinating the project for AAA and TreeHouse School and Thames Water; **and Funders** Santander, Tesco, Learning through Landscapes, Woodland Trust and Kew, Jack Petchey

Design team members: Arcadis, DLPiper, Wright and Wright Architects, Aecom

Volunteer organisations: Bank of America Merrill Lynch, BDO, BT, CEB Global, Columbia Threadneedle, Dentsu Aegis, Discovery Network, Goldman Sachs, Just IT, Lloyds, Marsh, Mens Shed, QBE, Right Management, Silva Arboriculture and Wholegrain Digital.

What was the motivation for carrying out the enhancement?

Motivation for the project was twofold. For Thames Water to connect and support their communities and to equip young people with complex autism with a love and respect for the natural environment and with horticulture and ecology skills that could be of use to them in employment when they leave education. To engage with our local and wider communities and demonstrate through action what young people with complex autism can achieve when give the opportunity.



From July 2016 work has been ongoing with the timeline displayed on the fence, as well as bramble clearance we removed 5 footballs and two black bin liners full of bagged dog poo!



Woodland habitat with a family of foxes, the space is enjoyed by children who have even practiced for their Duke of Edinburgh Award here