

Building homes for Nature
Belfast, Northern Ireland
Belfast Health & Social Care Trust

BIG Biodiversity Challenge Award category: Client Award

Project overview

Overwhelming evidence indicates that personal wellbeing, physical and mental, is improved significantly by nature. Our client, Belfast Health & Social Care Trust, (BHSCT) has a sound understanding of this principle, and had the vision to see it delivered in practice at the new £30 Million Replacement Acute Mental Health Inpatient Facility.

Located on a brownfield inner city site within Belfast City Hospital, from the outset, the client and team objective has been to create a positive space for healing, where patients experience inclusion and normalisation.

Recognised as being core to the healing process, the gardens will feature in every aspect of hospital life. From first arrival, patients, staff and visitors will experience the hospital as a journey between gardens rather than through dull corridors.

During the build, BHSCT identified a further opportunity to incorporate more biodiversity value into the project by finding a suitable place to include swift nest bricks.

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

Pre-project, AECOM provided an assessment of the nature conservation related features of the area. The two key findings were the presence of bats, and Japanese Knotweed along the boundary. To facilitate the new scheme the site was cleared of all buildings and vegetation. Appropriate mitigation measures were implemented, including the installation of bat roost boxes.



Photo Description: Digital image of a garden to be included in the Replacement Acute Mental Health Inpatient Facility



Were there any specific reasons that led to this project?

As urban centres become more developed and the demand for housing and infrastructure increases, green spaces and places where wildlife can feed and breed are being lost at an alarming rate.

In a bid to protect urban species, (this particular area of south Belfast supports Ireland's largest Swift colony) RSPB Northern Ireland developed a Pledge for Nature which 10 organisations (Including BHSCT and GRAHAM) from across Northern Ireland signed to show their support. This means we are committed to protecting and enhancing urban biodiversity through our operations and recognise that by working together we can help nature thrive amongst us in our modern environment.

The project is also hoping to achieve a BREEAM very good rating

What were the biodiversity measures taken?

Bird species, such as Swifts, have occupied cracks and crevices in our buildings for thousands of years, but the improved standard and style of modern construction has put their survival in our towns and cities at risk. By incorporating swift bricks into the design of the new build, the Trust has created a suitable habitat for this priority bird species - a simple intervention for nature that is easy to implement and replicate on other sites.

It was the client who approached the architect regarding their inclusion and persisted to ensure that they were incorporated in a suitable place within the fabric, to complement the garden plans and add to the biodiversity value to the site. The RSPB's Urban Land Management Advisor provided the technical advice on installation of the bricks, and RSPB Northern Ireland supplied the material for a Tool Box Talk informing the site team about the importance of these visiting birds on 22nd May - International Day of Biodiversity.

To supplement the new habitat the Trust also erected RSBP signage asking site users to participate in a site survey recording swift sightings in order to determine where the swifts are breeding. Encouraging people to become citizen scientists' promotes the collection of simple observations to provide essential data to help conserve our wildlife.



Photo Description: The Trust erected RSPB signage encouraging site users to report swift sightings



Photo Description: Francois Viljoen and Niall O'Kane from GRAHAM-BAM Healthcare Partnership reviewing the swift bricks on site



How would you best describe the project?

Enhancement

Further information

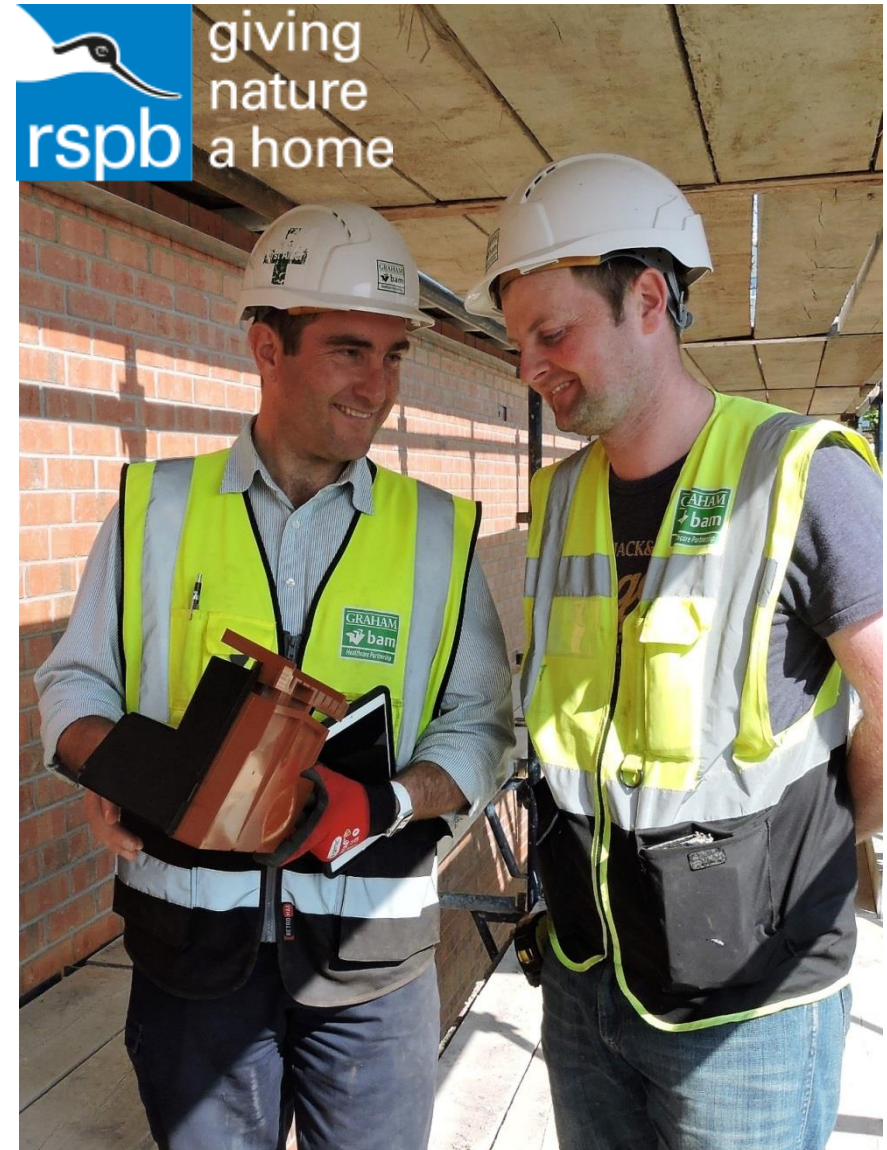
This project is ongoing, due for completion in September 2018. The swift bricks have been installed in the plant room one of the first elements of the facility to be completed. It is hoped that the swifts will take up residence next summer.

Installing the swift bricks did meet with some initial resistance from the architect and design teams, despite the fact that both client and contractor were 100% behind their inclusion. Having access to the RSPB technical experts proved invaluable to overcome this and hopefully this collaboration has increased awareness of biodiversity with those in that field.

By encouraging wildlife to this very urban area, we are improving access to nature for Trust service users and employees.

What was your personal motivation for carrying out the enhancement?

Belfast Health and Social Care Trust understand that biodiversity is integral to our mental and physical health. They are positive advocates for biodiversity and health, and this case study is just one example where they have implemented measures to promote and enhance nature to compliment one of the projects on their estate.



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