

Bees in the workplace – living in harmony with pollinators Head Office, Birmingham

Interserve

BIG Biodiversity Challenge Award category: Pollinator

Project overview

During 2015, bees arrived at Interserve's busy Birmingham headquarters, home to some 300 people, and moved into the wall cavity of offices adjacent to the site's main vehicular and pedestrian access. Despite the initial uncertainty of some staff, no-one suggested they should be destroyed and no-one was stung. In fact the bees' presence generated considerable interest as they went about their business from their new office home.

In June this year, the bees swarmed and settled on a window ledge. A bee-keeper from the British Beekeepers Association removed the swarm, including the Queen, rehoming it in a local hive. The original nest remains in the wall cavity with a new Queen, so we anticipate a repetition of events. As Interserve Facilities Manager Graham Ballinger says, "It's good to know that we're able to assist in multiplying the bee population!"

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

This is a typical office block in a suburban area, close to the M6 motorway. It is a large site with few green areas, and the majority of space allocated to car parking. Although there are allotments nearby, there is little wildlife evident on the premises.

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

The Facilities Manager is a staunch defender of the right of the bees to remain and was unwilling to consider any other option.

However, destroying the bees and their nest is legal. This course of action is often taken in similar situations without thought for wider biodiversity issues.



Photo Description: Entrance to Interserve offices. Bee hive is in the cavity above the large window.

It is easy to use the defence of Health and Safety concerns in such circumstances and undoubtedly people can be anxious about insects. However, supported by ongoing communication from the on-site team, employees and visitors accepted the bees as their neighbours, including staff members who had to walk by the nest every day.

What were the biodiversity measures taken?

A chance settlement of bees in this cavity wall has provided an unexpected means of learning about pollinators - and the threat they face - for many of our staff. Most bees are very unlikely to sting unless provoked, although people are often not aware of that fact. The interest and awareness of nature the bees engendered was very beneficial for the office community.

Protection given to the bees by the Interserve site team has been a very positive message that will resonate throughout our offices. In an environment lacking in wildlife, the bees also provided a source of food for sparrows nesting nearby who could be seen swooping down from the office roof to feed.

An ongoing commitment to biodiversity, that educated and engaged staff, is illustrated by:

- The Facilities Manager, Security Guard and members of staff on site welcomed the bees. The team was happy to accommodate the minimum inconvenience caused by the bees in order to support pollinators, known to be under threat – and celebrate the colour and life they brought to an otherwise sterile office space. The bees were closely supervised by the site Security Guard who directed pedestrians around the area when the bees were most active.
- When the bees swarmed, a staff member in the offices contacted a local bee-keeper who removed the bees. They have now been rehomed into a spare hive owned by an individual who can manage and protect them in a domesticated environment.
- Thus, through a proactive and caring approach, a net gain of one swarm of bees has been achieved and it is hoped that this will be repeated again in the future.



Photo Description: The swarm of Bees

How would you best describe the project?

Enhancement but difficult to categorise.

Further information

Since this was a chance event, positively developed by the response of the on-site team, the main lessons learnt were:

- Living with bees is not difficult and their life cycle is fascinating. They should be tolerated and accepted in non-rural environments rather than regarded with hostility or fear.
- We should have used their presence on site to raise awareness across the wider business, undertaking a company blog to reach out and educate a much larger audience. However, this is an on-going project and we will be applying lessons learnt the next time bees are in residence within our company premises.

What was your personal motivation for carrying out the enhancement?

Our Facilities Manager has a friend who is an experienced beekeeper, keeping bees as part of a joint venture with the Bourneville Village Trust. Over the years, he has been convinced of the worth of bees to society and now does everything he can to protect them.



Photo Description: Bees swarming