



Bradgers Hill Wilder Futures Project EVALUATION REPORT

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**Beds, Cambs
& Northants**



BrightCulture



**HERITAGE
FUND**

Executive Summary



The Bradgers Hill Wilder Futures Project focused on raising awareness of Bradgers Hill and other green spaces enveloping North Luton, enabling the local community to more easily explore and enjoy these spaces. Improving awareness, access and interpretation, to make the hill feel more welcoming and inclusive. The project provided a variety of ways for people to learn about and connect with nature, through events and activities, building on the work of the Friends of Bradgers Hill at Bushmead Community Hub.

During the three-year programme, the Wilder Futures project has:

- Engaged **256 Secondary School students** and **493 Primary School students** with nature and wildlife conservation activities across Luton.
- Welcomed **641 local people** to events including walks, talks and family fun days.
- Engaged **33 young people** in Luton with nature, conservation and wellbeing talks and activities, including A-Level practical sessions for local college students.
- Provided regular clubs for **179 local children** under 11 years and their parents.
- Involved over **100 volunteers** in conservation activity across Luton.
- Provided hands-on training sessions to **30 local people**.
- Installed **6 new interpretation boards** and **20 way markers** encouraging people to follow three different routes around and enjoy and learn about Bradgers Hill.
- Planted over **2500 new trees** in green spaces in Luton.
- Created a newsletter for Luton residents, promoting local conservation activities and events to **232 recipients**.

This report provides an external evaluative review undertaken by Bright Culture of the Bradgers Hill Wilder Futures Project funded by The National Lottery Heritage Fund and led by the Wildlife Trust Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire, Northamptonshire from April 2021 to April 2024.

Introduction

Bradgers Hill is located to the North of Luton in Bedfordshire. Adjacent to Stopsley Common, Bradger's Hill encompasses a large area of chalk grassland and some pockets of scrub that stretches right into the heart of Luton. It supports many wild flowers typical of chalk grassland, and has the longest continuous set of lynchets (ridges formed by ancient ploughing) in Bedfordshire and as such is listed as a Scheduled Ancient Monument.

The John Dony Field Centre (now known as Bushmead Community Hub) on the Bushmead estate ran ecological field trips on nearby Bradgers Hill for fifteen years until 2012. Since that time, the Friends of Bradgers Hill (FOBH) continued to link the community with the site through talks, walks and some light conservation activity but with limited capacity.

The Wilder Futures project at Bradgers Hill was initially developed by the FOBH and originated with the aim to revitalise the Community Hub's link to Bradgers Hill and build on their previous conservation work. The initial project enquiry submitted in 2018 by the FOBH with Luton Borough Council (LBC) as a partner, received feedback from the Heritage Fund that it was unlikely to be successful.

Shortly afterwards, in 2019 the Covid-19 pandemic took hold and the Heritage Fund were keen to invest on an emergency basis in Luton. It was thought that the project fitted this emergency funding well and the Heritage Fund approached the Wildlife Trust to apply. It was suggested that the application would be improved if the Wildlife Trust were the project lead, because of their extensive experience of delivering community engagement activities across Bedfordshire.



The application was resubmitted in 2020, this time with the Wildlife Trust as the lead applicant and in partnership with FOBH and LBC. The application focused on creating opportunities for the wider community to explore the landscape surrounding North Luton, delivering benefits to health, wellbeing and the environment. Supporting the challenges faced by local people during the Covid-19 pandemic. The application was successful and awarded funding in September 2020.

The fact that the Wildlife Trust were approached by the Heritage Fund to deliver the project sets it apart from other projects. There were no firm expectations on what the project would deliver, aside from the key outcome of engaging more people with heritage. The project was given flexibility and this allowed the project team to adjust and alter the project as it developed, adhering to the needs of the communities who were taking part.

The final project was delivered in partnership with the FOBH, The Conservation Volunteers (TCV), Luton Borough Council (LBC) and led by the Wildlife Trust, Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire and Northamptonshire (WTBCN).

A WTBCN Communities and Education Officer was employed as part of the project to support the Communities and Education Manager and wider team in delivery. Priority audiences targeted through the project were:

- Diverse and underrepresented audiences.
- Local community groups.
- Primary and Secondary Schools.
- Youth organisations.

The overarching aim of the project was to raise awareness of Bradgers Hill and other green spaces in North Luton so the local community could more easily explore and enjoy these spaces. This would be achieved through:

1. A series of community events which involve new people in different ways, seeking to improve wellbeing, environmental and wildlife awareness.

2. Improvement and creation of new physical and digital interpretation to improve visitor experience and to enhance learning and enjoyment.

3. Working with the FOBH and supporting new volunteers to help with people engagement.

4. Planning: Production of a post-project plan to ensure sustainability for the future, including a site management plan and a plan for an internship placement.

5. Conservation improvements that help the nature reserve obtain a higher designation.

6. Delivery of a school's programme to include a minimum of three schools including a teacher training workshop.

7. Delivery of youth conservation days in partnership with Tokko Youth Centre or other youth based organisations in the town.

Impact of Covid-19

The project launched in April 2021, during the Covid-19 pandemic. Schools and Colleges in England had only just re-opened at the beginning of March following the second lockdown and government restrictions were still in place limiting social contact and encouraging people to stay at home.

In April, non-essential retail, hairdressers, public buildings (e.g. libraries and museums) reopen. Outdoor venues also open, as well as indoor leisure. By July 2021, most legal limits on social contact are removed and the remaining sectors of the economy reopen. However, in December, as the Omicron variant spreads, face masks again become compulsory in most public places.

This context is important and Covid-19 has had an impact on project delivery. The project had a slower start than anticipated as the project team adhered to government restrictions. In 2022, more activity was able to take place, but connecting with schools and youth organisations was challenging, with schools limiting visitors coming into school or trips out.

The project was only able to really get going in late 2022 when all restrictions were lifted. However, the project still felt the effects of the pandemic in 2022 and even in 2023, experiencing increased challenges around volunteer recruitment.

Evaluation

Collection of data and evidence and early project evaluation was led by the Communities and Education Manager and supported by the Communities and Education Officer.

In June 2023, Lisa Davenport from Bright Culture, an Arts and Heritage Consultancy was contracted as an external evaluator to support the final phase of the project.

Lisa has supported the team by providing support around evaluation resources, surveys and gathering data.

The project evaluation follows the logic model approach, linking aims, outputs and outcomes for all elements of the project. It concentrates on the short and medium-term outcomes, telling the story of the project and detailing what the project hoped to achieve, what it actually achieved and the successes, challenges and learning that happened as part of the process.

There have been challenges around collecting data. The first being that Bradger's Hill is an outdoor and exposed space, and the majority of activities have taken place outside in most weathers. This has limited our use of methods which use paper or pencils, with no hard surfaces to lean on and often being out in windy and wet conditions. The use of digital technology to gather data was not appropriate during activities which aimed to bring people closer to nature and away from screens.

The Wildlife Trust has no fixed visitor centre in Luton and whilst they had access to a notice board and a small space within Bushmead Community Hub, again there were limitations in creating any sort of fixed feedback station.

Despite these challenges, a combination of methods has been used to collect a strong set of qualitative and quantitative data and evidence, including:

- **Record of participant numbers at all events and workshops.**
- **Participant feedback forms, distributed at events and activities (65 returns).**
- **An online community survey, distributed via the Wilder Futures newsletter (25 returns).**
- **Record of volunteer numbers involved in the project.**
- **Regular club feedback cards (16 returns)**
- **Volunteer Feedback forms (3 returns).**
- **Observations of events and workshops.**
- **Vox-pop interviews at events (10 participants).**
- **Email feedback from participants throughout the project.**
- **In-depth interviews with Primary and Secondary School Teachers, Luton Youth Network and Luton Borough Council.**
- **Project Team Reflection Meeting.**
- **Photographic record.**



Delivery & Findings

In summary, the delivered outputs and outcomes are:

PROJECT AIMS	DELIVERED OUTPUTS	OUTCOMES
1. Deliver a series of community events which involve new people in different ways, seeking to improve wellbeing, environmental and wildlife awareness.	44 events, walks and talks have been delivered engaging 641 local people.	A wider range of people have taken part in activities on Bradgers Hill and other green spaces across Luton.
2. Improve and create new physical and digital interpretation to improve visitor experience and to enhance learning and enjoyment.	Six new interpretation boards have been installed providing information. QR codes link people to translated information. 20 new way markers installed and 3 new walking routes created.	Bradgers Hill is a welcoming place, walking routes are clear, the site is better explained & translations make the site accessible to a wider audience.
3. Work alongside FOBH and support new volunteers to help with people engagement.	Over 100 people have been involved in volunteer activity.	A wider range of people have taken part in activities. Volunteers have learnt new skills and enjoyed their work.
4. Undertake conservation improvements that help the nature reserve obtain a higher designation.	Large areas of grassland have been created, steps replaced and paths widened to improve access and site ecology. Parts of Stopsley Common were upgraded from District Wildlife Site to County Wildlife Site thanks to the project surveying work. Planting 2500 trees at Hay Wood on Stopsley Common.	The site is in better condition as a result of the ongoing conservation, delivered by a strong, upskilled team.
5. Deliver a school's programme to a minimum of three schools including a teacher training workshop.	The programme has been delivered to 3 local schools with additional workshops delivered to a further 7 secondary schools and 6 primary schools. Over 749 students have taken part in activities.	Pupils had enjoyable experiences, learnt about nature/wildlife and gained confidence and new skills.
6. Deliver youth conservation days in partnership with Tokko Youth Centre or other youth based organisations in the town.	Youth conservation days were delivered in partnership with Youthscape and 14 young people took part. A further 19 young people took part in conservation-based activities during the project.	Young people had enjoyable experiences, learnt about nature/wildlife and gained new skills. An upskilled project team will impact future project planning.

Community Engagement

Events

The aim was to deliver a series of community events which involve people (particularly those who do not connect with green spaces) in different ways, seeking to improve wellbeing, environmental and wildlife awareness.

A real mix of events have been delivered, in the hope that there would be something for everyone. Some events have been onsite at Bradgers Hill, some at Bushmead Community Hub and some using other nature sites in Luton. Events have included walks and talks, conservation tasks such as scrub clearance and tree planting, family wildlife explorer days, litter picks and forest schools. In total, 44 events have been delivered engaging 641 local people. Highlights include:

Family Fun Day

Delivered in February half term at Bushmead Community Centre in 2023, 33 adults and 42 children attended to take part in activities including crafting, bird box building and guided walks to Bradgers Hill. Local organisations joined the event and provided displays and interactive activities. This was one of the most well attended events and on reflection, the team feel this was for several reasons; the range of content, the items you could take home and the fact that it was an indoor event in February. Easter events were less well attended, perhaps due to more competition from other local organisations or because they were held outdoors.

'My kid thought it was great fun and as an adult, it felt well organised and run.'

Event Participant



Guided Walks

A variety of walks have been trialled throughout the project and had mixed results. A wellbeing walk delivered in October 2022 had 5 people attend, but later the same walk in January 2023 had 10 people attend. A Birdsong and Bluebell walk to Bradgers Hill to listen for birdsong at dawn and enjoy the bluebells at Hay Wood, led by an external walk leader was well attended with 15 people joining in. Then in August 2023, 26 people attended an evening Creatures of the Night walk from Stopsley High School to Bradgers Hill with bat detectors and moth recorders, recording around 50 species. Walks led by an expert guide or walks focussing on something a bit different seem to attract larger audiences, rather than the more generalised walks for wellbeing.

The project team have been proactive in engaging with the local community and in particular, underrepresented groups who do not traditionally engage with Wildlife Trust activities. The team have attended Muslim Prayer meetings in Luton to promote activities. They have taken care to use images of people within their marketing which reflect the diversity of the local communities. The team actively reached out to the LGBT Links Luton group and led a guided walk for the LGBT community with 10 participants.

Demographic information on event visitors is limited as practically, completing feedback forms during outdoor activities is challenging, and it can also become a barrier to engagement/enjoyment. We do know that out of 65 feedback form returns, 35 respondents (54%) described their ethnic background White English/Welsh/Scottish/Northern Irish/British and 29 respondents described their ethnic background as White and Black Caribbean, White and Asian, Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Polish, Romanian, American or German, which is just less than half at 45%. There is no baseline data to compare this to, but it does indicate that activity is engaging a diverse audience. It can also be stated with reasonable confidence that the project has engaged new audiences as feedback forms tell us that 34 out of 63 respondents (54%) had not visited a Wildlife Trust event previously.

The project has enabled the team to trial new activities and form of picture of what engages new audiences and what doesn't. The majority of events have been outdoors and there have been some challenges around attendance. The team have learnt lessons around using central locations but also booking processes, costs, good signage and delivering events which are nearby toilet and refreshment facilities.

Regular clubs for children

Wild Ed.

Wild Ed sessions provide local home-schooled students aged 6-11 years a chance to learn about the environment and take part in Forest School activities using Wardown Park, Luton's central and flagship green space, as it was felt this was the most accessible location. Occasional trips have taken the group to Bradger's Hill and other nature sites across Luton. To date, 31 sessions have taken place bi-monthly and included shelter building, woodwork, nature art and safe fire lighting. There have been 82 children regularly attending the sessions, which have also included mindfulness and wellbeing activities.

Session feedback has been positive and the Communities and Education Officer (CEO) has developed the sessions, in terms of timings, location and content to suit the home schooling community.

Parents are encouraged to take a step back during the sessions and let their children independently get involved in the workshops under the guidance of the leader and volunteers. This model has worked well, both from the home schooling parents point of view who are looking for this type of independent activity but also from a delivery point of view.

As a result of the WildEd sessions, new friendships and social opportunities have developed amongst the children and the adults.

'If I'm totally honest these sessions have been invaluable to the Luton home ed community. My daughter has made the most beautiful group of friends that she now sees them almost every day, and one even lives opposite us. It has helped us create a strong community of local people.' Wild Ed. Parent



'I really enjoyed the event today. My children loved the camp fire which they did at the end and toasting marshmallows, it increased their confidence around fire. It was a nice mix of activities and it was a chance for mums to chat and know the kids are safe.'

Family Fun Day Participant

The online survey results tell us that people who attended the programmed events and regular clubs enjoyed them. It is a small sample, but 80% of respondents (20 out of 25) said that the Wildlife Trust event they visited had encouraged them to visit that site again after the session. Furthermore, 25 out of 25 respondents (100%) said they would return to a Wildlife Trust event in the future.

Respondents were asked what activities they would like to attend in the future, the top scoring options were:

- Forest school activities
- Community events for all ages
- Gardening for wildlife/Food growing
- Tree planting
- Wildlife walks.

Other suggestions including orchard care, a coppicing course, beekeeping and foraging sessions.

One of the project aims was to improve wellbeing and activities have focused on providing opportunities for participants to improve their mental health through the 5 ways to wellbeing, developed by the New Economics Foundation; Connect, Be Active, Take Notice, Keep Learning and Give. The impact of events on participants' wellbeing can be difficult to measure in the short term. Participants were asked to share three words that described their experience of the event. Feedback includes:

'Calming, joyful, friendly'

'Satisfying, meditative, social'

'Enjoyable, educational, communal'

'Fun, informative, social'

'Beautiful, good exercise, gained new knowledge'

'Energised, positive, feel good factor, meeting others.'

'Outdoor, physical activity'

Out of 65 feedback form respondents, 37 used the word 'informative' or 'educational' which indicates that sessions provided over half of those who completed forms (57%) with the opportunity to learn. Other respondents used words such as connect, communal, social and active, all descriptions which link to the five ways to wellbeing.

'Really good, informative, well organised, lots of effort put in by organisers.'

Event Participant

Little Bugs Club

The Little Bugs Club was designed to engage younger children aged 2-5 years. 74 children regularly attend the bi-monthly sessions which have primarily taken place at Wardown Park and included walks around Bradgers Hill and other green spaces across Luton. Activities have included messy play, crafts, making shelters, story time and tool use.

The CEO reflects that there were several challenges in delivery. One being the weather, sessions ran whatever the weather and families were encouraged to dress appropriately but poor weather was a barrier to engagement, with parents feeling uncomfortable being outside in cold and wet conditions. Another barrier was participants confidence levels in being outdoors, exploring Luton's green spaces and knowing what to do with children outside. Some parents do not get involved in activities, but bring their children to the sessions so they can experience activities with the support of the CEO. The CEO showcased a range of simple and creative activities which allowed for learning, play and connection with nature. Activities which could be replicated by parents in their own time.

'These sessions have made my son enjoy outdoors and nature a lot more, he has become more confident and interested in learning about nature.' Little Bugs Club Parent

'My child has become more curious about nature, she's developed an interest for it.' Little Bugs Club Parent

The CEO reflects that the Little Bugs children are now confident in sharing their activities outside of the sessions which link to nature. Exploring new things when they are out and about that they perhaps they might not have done previously before attending the sessions.

Key learning

Clubs and regular activities have worked well and have seen regular attendance from local people. Participants gain confidence in the space, the delivery style, the enjoyability factor and the value for money. Ensuring the same person is leading the session so families know what to expect has been a key part of the success.

Activities delivered at Wardown Park have achieved good numbers, due to it's central and accessible location. Local people have heard of it. Other spaces, including Bradgers Hill have been more challenging for people to get to.

There is limited provision for home schoolers in Luton with families previously travelling out of the area to access opportunities. Sessions have been popular and built a regular audience. There could be scope to offer home schooled children aged 11+ activities.

Free of charge events have seen low attendance, often with people booking onto sessions and then not turning up. This has meant that others have missed out on sessions which have been fully booked and overall make activities difficult to resource and plan for. Applying a small fee to activities has helped people commit to attending - whilst still keeping it affordable.

Walks have been programmed at different times during the year to test content and find out what people are most interested in. This has led to a lack of continuity and regularity. The next step is to trial a regular monthly walk to see whether this encourages more people to attend.

Interpretation and waymarking



Six new interpretation boards have been developed and produced in partnership with FOBH and LBC. These were installed in February 2024. The boards are located at various locations across Bradgers Hill and Stopsley Common and each have images and a description of the landscape.

Each board has a map which provides a short, medium and long distance walk around the site which are waymarked with posts so that people can easily follow the routes. The short route is on level ground which can be easily accessed by those less mobile. The medium route shows off the best of the site's heritage, chalk grassland and flowers. The third route helps people link Bradger's Hill to Stopsley Common and the ancient woodland found there.

Boards also include a QR code which can be scanned and will provide a translation of the board by Foreign Language Services in the four most widely spoken languages in Luton: Urdu, Polish, Romanian and Bengali.

In June 2023, 13 people came along to a session to trial the different walking routes and help the project team in deciding the short, medium and longer options.

The group also helped work out the locations for the boards and the waymarkers. One board has been positioned outside Inspire Leisure Centre. This was a suggestion made by one of the volunteers as a way of reaching people who might not necessarily be aware of the walking routes close by.

Improved signage across the site, includes new signage to pick up dog mess. This is the result of people feeding back during several workshop sessions that the sites can feel like places for dog walkers only. People without dogs can feel excluded from outdoor green spaces in Luton and don't feel a they have a need to walk or be there. It is hoped that the new signage will help keep the areas cleaner so they are welcoming for all members of the community.

Additional information boards and a new wooden bench have been installed at Bushmead Community Hub. These share information about the garden, the planting and the habitats created.



Volunteers

A variety of volunteer opportunities have been developed for local people to get involved in the Wilder Futures project. These have ranged from monthly conservation tasks delivered by TCV on the same day each month to build momentum. Other volunteers have helped FOBH to pick litter every month and some have supported in the running of community events and regular clubs. For those who cannot commit on a regular basis there have been one-off opportunities to help improve the garden areas of Bushmead Community Hub and to help with tree planting on Stopsley Common.

Attendance levels have varied and it has taken time to establish a regular group of willing volunteers. In part, this was due to Covid-19 when local volunteer groups all but disbanded and it took time for the sector as a whole to re-engage volunteers in community roles.

The partnership with TCV has enabled the project team to work with a larger pool of local volunteers. Initially, the majority came from Bedford where TCV is based, but with time, numbers have built up in Luton. Approximately 5-15 volunteers have attended monthly sessions led by TCV at the Luton sites. Tasks have included replacing old steps to help improve access and clearing scrub to help create larger areas of chalk grassland.

'As well as volunteering I have attended some of the events which have also been excellent. It has been great to meet like minded people, learn more about my local area and have the chance to make my own contributions to the project.' Volunteer



'As a local resident who has enjoyed Bradgers Hill since I was a child, I have really valued the opportunity to be involved with helping people to engage with nature in Luton.' Volunteer

Across the volunteer roles, numbers have slowly increased since the project started, and consistent dates and accessible locations seem to encourage more people to attend.

One particular achievement of the project was the development of the Stopsley Common Friends Group. Engaging this community was important as Stopsley Common is adjacent to Bradgers Hill and part of the wider landscape. For two local residents who showed a keen interest in the project, they have now been given volunteer roles and are actively taking part in conservation work across the site.



One-off volunteer activity days have been offered to local organisations and this has enabled people who might not usually consider volunteering for a natural landscaping task get involved in the project. Team members from the Good Gym in Luton and the local libraries have taken part in these sessions.

Volunteer feedback is positive and those involved feel like valued team members. Volunteers note that the team of people leading the project make a difference and their approach and teaching style has made it easy to volunteer. Volunteers have felt welcome, well supported, have learnt new things and gained new skills.

Bradgers Hill and the surrounding landscape has benefitted from the regular volunteer work and many physical changes have taken place. New steps and pathways have improved access, regular litter picks have made the site safer and cleaner and more grassland areas and trees have benefitted the wildlife.

'I have a lifelong interest in wildlife/ecology and seeing such a great local project, I wanted to be involved. I teach in a school and am keen to get the children involved with more outdoor learning / increasing grounds biodiversity. By volunteering, I am also improving my knowledge and gaining ideas I can use in school.' Volunteer

Surveys and monitoring work have not only enabled local people to learn and connect with nature but recorded information supports LBC's understanding of the site and this has supported future maintenance planning. Parts of Stopsley Common were upgraded from District Wildlife Site to County Wildlife Site thanks to the project surveying work undertaken by volunteers.

Key learning

Engaging young people with regular volunteer work has been challenging. The project has had little success in engaging people aged 16-25 and more success in engaging with the over 25 age group. The team have had more success in engaging youth groups with one-off volunteering tasks.

It has been difficult to recruit diverse and underrepresented audiences despite promoting activities widely and using events to showcase volunteer activity. The team have consulted with event/club participants from diverse backgrounds to try to understand what the barriers to volunteering are. A lack of awareness, understanding of the volunteer roles on offer and limited spare time were the most common factors amongst those already attending events and clubs.

It is important to always have an activity on offer, as project team members are regularly contacted by local organisations looking for activities. Being able to say yes, and then support the session with their expertise and equipment has led to new partnerships and a wider range of people engaging with nature.

Education

Education has been a key element of this project, with over 749 students in Luton taking part in project activities. The aim was to engage three local schools with regular forest school activity. This was achieved at two Primary Schools and one Secondary School but the project has organised activities for six more Primary Schools and a further seven Secondary Schools. Cranfield University students were engaged with some practical volunteering tasks and the project was promoted to the University of Bedfordshire students during their Mental Health Day and Coping with Stress Day where WTBCN led drop-in sessions.

Bushmead Primary School, Dallow Primary School and Cardinal Newman Catholic School (Secondary) took part in 6-week forest school programmes in 2022 and 2023 which have included interactive sessions in school, at Bradgers Hill and other green spaces in Luton.

Bushmead Primary School, the nearest school to Bradgers Hill are just a 5-10min walk from the hill. Despite being so close, many children taking part had never been to Bradgers Hill before, so taking part in activities to explore their local landscape was a great opportunity. The CEO remembers the moment the children got to the top of the hill and enjoyed the view across Luton being a real project highlight. Later in the project, children led their own tours up the hill for their peers and also fed back that they took their own families on tours of the hill in their own time.

‘Some of the children we have taken on this session struggle with behaviour. Just seeing them so happy and confident and carefree – gives them a taste of what is out there – just because they find one area of the curriculum tricky they can excel in other things.’

Deputy Head of Bushmead Primary School



The Deputy Headteacher felt that the programme was well planned and was particularly happy about the approach the Wildlife Trust took to developing the sessions. A menu of activity was suggested to the teacher and they worked together to select what would work best for the children. The school chose children who would not normally get this sort of opportunity and commented on how empowering it was for them to be able to share their experience with the rest of the school.

Each session was unique, engaging and interactive and children were excited to take part each week. Delivering the sessions over a 6-week period to the same group of children also had benefits. Confidence levels in being outside and connecting with nature increased after each session and they were able to take part or engage a little deeper with the content. If the teacher could change anything it would be to be able to offer the experience to more of the children in the school.



Dallow Primary School were also invited to take part in the project, as part of the projects' aim to connect underrepresented audiences with the site as it has a high number of pupil premium and free school meal pupils, and the proportion of pupils from minority ethnic groups is high. At the beginning of the project, the Headteacher was keen to take part in the programme and sessions were devised for and agreed by the school.

Unfortunately, the Headteacher left the school and it was challenging to maintain the communication and find a new contact, which made the sessions difficult to plan for. The school still took part in the 6-week programme and 19 children took part in activities. The CEO used the nearby Dallow Downs for sessions as they were in walking distance of the school.

The CEO reflects that having one main contact within a school who is keen to take part in the partnership is key to the success of projects.

Bushmead School had a pond and a wild area which were overgrown and unused. The WTBCN team were able to support parents and teachers in cleaning up the school's ponds and wild areas as part of the project. These areas then provided the opportunity to take students outside and do creative, nature-based activities when it wasn't feasible to take children out of school because of constraints on time.

A strong partnership has been developed with nearby Secondary School, Cardinal Newman. This started with the delivery of the forest school for Year 7 students. Walks to the nearby Warden and Galley Hills and a selection of creative activities linking to wellbeing, nature and the environment were led by WTBCN over a 6-week programme. Feedback was mixed with some students enjoying the activities more than others. For some students, this was the first time they had taken part in nature/wildlife based activities and feedback forms tell us that 18 out of 24 students had not previously heard of the Wildlife Trust before the project. The CEO reflects that sometimes the simplest of activities had most success, like bug hunting and life cycles, which many of the students had never had the chance to experience before.

Following on from the Forest School, a targeted project was developed with the Dom Bosco unit within the Secondary School, a specific behavioural intervention unit for students who are at risk of being excluded. Weekly sessions are now delivered by the WTBCN team and have been running for over a year. The WTBCN team are able to develop the sessions, bring the equipment, tools, safety gear but also the knowledge and expertise.

The Dom Bosco Coordinator reflects that one of the successes of the project, is the power of having an external person come into the school and lead the sessions. This has had a positive impact on the students and shown them that there are opportunities out there for those who might not follow an academic route but might choose a more practical career instead.

'The sessions would be difficult to run without Matt. The Wildlife Trust bring the tools, equipment and knowledge. Having people from outside school coming in makes an impact, they are not here to teach but share.' Dom Bosco Coordinator

The projects within the Secondary School have been successful, but not without challenge. Not all students are engaged with nature or being outdoors and willing to get involved in sessions. Behaviour can be difficult to manage. The project team have been well supported by the school and learnt new skills in working with young people and how to approach sessions. Delivering a focussed partnership with one school, rather than delivering one-off workshops at more schools, has enabled the project team to build a relationship with the teaching staff and students. As sessions have progressed, students have gained confidence and been willing to take part in more of the activities on offer.

There is a desire from the school to continue these sessions for the future, which they would be unable to do without the support of WTBCN. The Coordinator reflects on the benefits of getting the students outside, undertaking physical activity, learning about alternative future careers and working with adults other than teachers for those students who might be struggling in other areas of their lives.

Key learning

Finding the right contact within the school is critical. Projects work when the contact/link to the school is interested in nature and can see the benefits for their pupils.

Do not write-off activities that are deemed 'too young' for Secondary School students. One of the most successful sessions, was a bug hunt and identification workshop for secondary school students. Often, this age group have missed out on this sort of activity at a young age.

Working with Secondary School students takes skill and patience. It also takes continuity. One-off projects are less successful than regular sessions.

Tree planting is a great activity for all age groups. It is fairly easy to do, hands-on, and something visible students can go back and see as their tree grows.

If capacity allowed, the 6-week forest school model could be offered to more schools or more pupils within schools across Luton. A possible future goal could be for every child in Luton to take part in a forest school programme before the end of Year Six.

A flexible, co-curational approach is critical for schools, along with a mix of activities which can take place both inside and outside of school.

Funding needs to be in place to support any travel outside of school - but also factoring in the time this takes and the impact this would have on the school day.

Youth work

The original plan was to deliver a minimum of two youth conservation days with TOKKO Youth Centre as part of the development phase of the Chalkscapes project. When it came to delivering the project, young people were difficult to engage with due to staff changes at TOKKO Youth Centre and the Chalkscapes Project so the project team contacted Luton Youth Network and Youthscares to develop new links with youth organisations in the town.

In December 2022, the project team worked with Youthscares, a Youth Service provider in Luton to deliver a tree planting activity. This was part of their Compass project, which helps 13-14 year old young people disconnected from school, at risk of becoming NEET (not in Education, Employment or Training) post-16. Six young people attended the session and planted 50 trees. Another workshop was delivered for Youthscares in May 2023, where eight young people took part in a walk around Stopsley Common and activities such as tidying tree guards and fire lighting.

Luton Youth Network organise an annual climate conference for young people, which the Project Team have supported by delivering talks and activities. The team have also worked with the Youth Network on creating a film to capture young people taking action for the environment and discussing their feelings around nature and the climate crisis.

Activities for WTBCN Youth Rangers were delivered in July 2022 and August 2023 and gave young people aged 13-18 opportunities to get involved in conservation activities across the site. Nine young people took part in total. The team reflect that not all young people who have taken part have been interested in the physical side of conservation, which is the role the WTBCN traditionally offer.



Key learning

The ability to offer a ready-to-go package, to local youth clubs like Youthscares which includes hands-on physical activity is a good model for engagement. The WTBCN are well equipped to be this provider, with the expertise, knowledge and equipment. These sessions only really work annually and as one-offs, as the youth clubs are involved in a wide range of other activities. This model could be promoted more widely to more youth centres in the local area.

Having the capacity to attend the climate conferences led by the Youth Network, has been a successful way of engaging with local young people. The project team have been able to use this platform to share what conservation activity takes place in the town and reach more young people, including those who would not take on physical volunteering roles. The team can see that there are local young people who are keen to take on campaigning roles around climate change and there is scope for a future project here.

Training

The project team have offered several different training opportunities for the local community, focussing on conservation at Bradgers Hill and other green spaces in Luton. On some occasions organisations have requested training and at other times the WTBCN have promoted training sessions to the wider community. Activities have included:

Two nature connection training sessions were delivered for 10 local library staff, focusing on raising the team's confidence in how to connect library visitors with nature, through gardening, creative and sensory activities and using their own library collections. As part of this, in May 2023 six GCSE Construction students and 2 staff from Stopsley High School took part in a hands-on training session where the project team supported them in clearing up and building new raised beds at Stopsley Library, transforming the space for the community to use.



Two training sessions were delivered for the public. One in April 2023 which focussed on woodlands and attracted four people. Another session was delivered in July, when nine people came to learn about the chalk grassland found at Bragers Hill and other sites in Luton, which included information on how the grassland evolved, how it is managed and a walk up Bradgers Hill to identify rare flowers growing there. Both sessions were part of raising awareness of the rare habitats found in Luton and helping people to understand them.

'Learnt a lot and was a nice relaxed environment. Just a shame it rained but that's England! The passion of the speakers made it a great event.'
Training Participant

The project team have matched community organisations looking for training opportunities with local conservation or garden maintenance tasks that would, otherwise not be completed, including providing opportunities for the local Groundwork Green Team volunteers. The model has worked in an ad-hoc responsive way, but with success. Good partnership working and networking with other organisations across the town has enabled the team to match up projects with these training opportunities.

Internship planning

Part of the project was to develop plans for a future internship opportunity and the team have been exploring the need and demand for a role and what it could look like. Placement activities have been trialled with a member of the Wildlife Trust's Youth Forum who lives in Luton. The young person has volunteered on several occasions and shown a real interest in social media and speaking out about climate change and the environment.

SUCCESSSES & CHALLENGES

Successes

The project has reached all of its target audiences including diverse and underrepresented audiences, local community groups, primary and secondary schools and youth organisations, in some cases, with great success, despite the shorter activity delivery period because of Covid-19. The mixture of activity, events, training sessions, volunteering opportunities and a more intensive programme of clubs and forest schools has provided a range of ways for people to engage in meaningful and valuable ways. As a result, and combined with the new interpretation, the profile of Bradgers Hill and other green spaces in Luton has been raised.

Events, clubs and training workshops have all been well received and these have led to people feeling a connection with nature in Luton. The team have watched several local people engage with an event for the first time, then another, and then become a volunteer, going on to take an active role in caring for their local landscape. Regular club participants have attended the school holiday events and a following has been built over the course of the project.



'We've really enjoyed the activities we've attended. And it's been really nice to see wildlife related activities in an urban area. Long may it continue.' Survey Respondent

People who live in Luton and have never been to Bradgers Hill have now visited for the first time and project activities have given them the confidence to return and enjoy the space.

Access to Bradgers Hill has been improved, scrub cleared and more grassland created. The project has helped LBC focus attention on the site and offer a wider range of activities for their own volunteers. The project has actively engaged with LBC staff to help build up a higher number of volunteers willing to actively look after green spaces in Luton, in addition to at Bradgers Hill. Parts of Stopsley Common were upgraded from District Wildlife Site to County Wildlife Site thanks to the project surveying work undertaken by volunteers.

Volunteer roles have been developed for people who showed an interest in the project, came along to meetings but had no active role. These roles are varied and the project has enabled a wider range of opportunities through connections and partnerships. Roles now go beyond physical maintenance work as volunteers are also involved with monitoring green spaces in Luton and helping the project to organise community events and regular clubs. Volunteer involvement and enthusiasm helps promote green spaces in Luton and provides more resource, knowledge and makes the future of Luton's green spaces more sustainable.

Project team members have gained new skills in engaging with and providing activities for a broader range of audiences. The team have gained a better knowledge and understanding of the needs and demands of the local community, the barriers to engagement and are able to plan projects which break down these barriers. The project has allowed space to test ideas and trial different ways of working. Future plans will be more robust, evidenced by the learning from this project.

The partnership work on this project has been exemplary. Despite working for different organisations with different strategies and agendas the project team members have worked together to deliver the key aims of the project. When one organisation has been unable to provide an activity, another has stepped in, or they have signposted local people to opportunities between them. The workload has been shared and this has enabled more activity to take place. The passion, commitment and loyalty to making Luton's green spaces more accessible is clear and each team member has invested into this. This ethic has been absorbed by the volunteer team, who are keen to be part of this important project in the town.

Challenges

Recruiting volunteers during and after the Covid-19 pandemic was difficult and it took time for the local community to take part in programmed activity. It has been particularly hard to engage younger volunteers with conservation activity and there hasn't been interest in these roles despite promoting them locally and through the Youth Network. The team have found that there is more interest in campaigning and social media activity around climate change and future projects need to take this into account.



Despite the project events and regular clubs attracting a more diverse audience, the volunteer programme has not. Further time needs to be invested in developing the volunteer programme, including learning from other local organisations who have successfully engaged diverse audiences with their programmes. It may also include trialling new roles and offering more flexible one-off opportunities such as community volunteer days.

Original aims to connect with local schools included a teacher training session. In practice, the team did not feel they were skilled to deliver this. Instead the focus has been placed on offering local schools forest school taster days, to give teachers ideas of the sort of activities they could provide children in school.

Evaluating activities, which take place outdoors, in all weathers has been difficult for the team. The online survey also had a small number of returns despite wide promotion and incentives. The style of activities the project has delivered are physical, informal and fun and don't match well with form-filling in. In response, the project team have taken a lighter informal approach to evaluation, observing sessions, having conversations and asking participants what they would like to see in terms of future events and activities. This has provided ongoing feedback for the team who have incorporated suggestions and ideas into delivery.

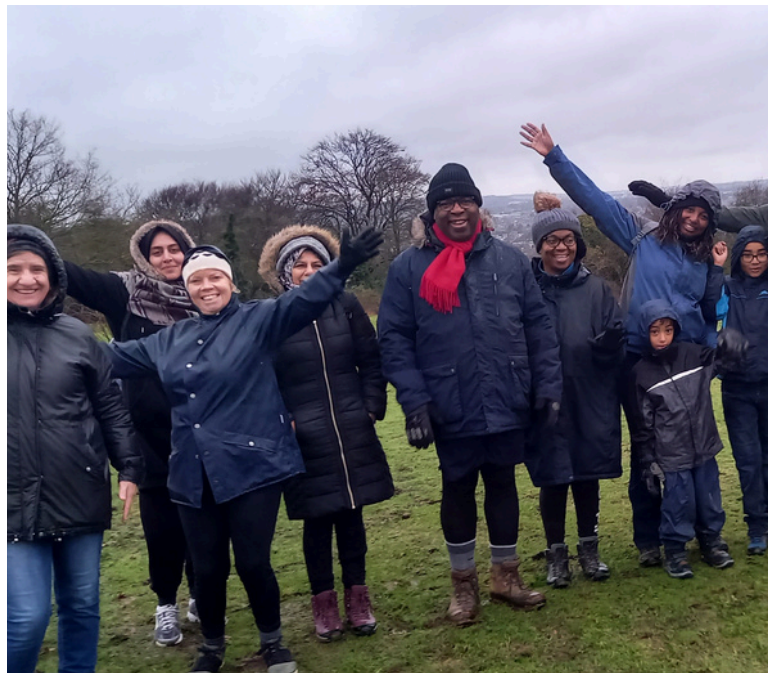
CONCLUSION

The change attributable to the Bradgers Hill Wilder Futures Project has been significant. Over 1700 people have taken part in activities that connect them with Bradgers Hill and other green spaces in Luton and the site is now a more accessible, welcoming and cared for place. There is learning from this project that can be captured for future projects:

- The project would not have been able to take place without the project's CEO position and the capacity and continuity the post brought to the programme.
- A strong and skilled team leading the project provided important continuity for volunteers and participants and enabled them to build their confidence in connecting with the landscape.
- Regular, continuous activity that people can rely on, whether school activities, walks, clubs or voluntary opportunities have worked well across the project, although some organisations prefer one-off activities, so there needs to be a combination to suit all audiences.
- More time needs to be invested in promotion, raising awareness and developing a range of volunteer roles to engage a more diverse audience.

Sustaining the impact and building on the legacy of the project for the site will require commitment from all the organisations involved. A key part of this will be continuing to support the development of the localised Friends Groups to lead projects and undertake conversation activity independently.

WTBCN have committed to delivering a programme of activities and school engagement in Luton, focussing on the most successful models trialled within this project and building on the partnerships already made.



The CEO role ends with this project and the WTBCN team are currently working on securing funding to enable this position to continue. This would enable the continuation of the Little Bugs and Wild Ed programmes.

The Heritage Fund were keen for the WTBCN to lead this project and provided flexibility and space around delivery. This had a positive impact on the project, but was dependent on an experienced project team who were established locally and knew their community well.

In three years the project has successfully raised the profile of Bradgers Hill, interpreting and sharing its significance to a much broader audience. The project leaves the wider team upskilled and confident in their understanding of both the site and the needs of the local community and how they can successfully connect people with the natural landscape, offering opportunities for training, learning and development. The project leaves the landscape at Bradgers Hill in better condition, accessible, with a plan to safeguard its future and a strong team of local volunteers committed to looking after it and other green spaces across Luton.