



STUDENTS
ORGANISING FOR
SUSTAINABILITY
UNITED KINGDOM

CONCEPT NOTE: WILDING CAMPUSES PILOT

Piloting a nature recovery programme, bringing people, plants and wildlife onto UK university and college campuses

1. Summary

The UK is one of the most [nature depleted](#) countries in the world and we are living through an ecological crisis. Returning to wilder ecosystems should not just be left to a few large landowners or the big conservation charities - everyone who owns or manages land needs to be helping to restore nature, so we can create a rich patchwork of biodiversity and improve access to nature for everyone. Wilding Campuses is not a rewilding programme but instead aims for ambitious management of university and college campuses bringing people, plants and wildlife into these spaces. Initially we are seeking a minimum of £234K for a pilot undertaken over two years at four campuses. Ideally this will include at least one college, and one local partnership between two or more different institutions.

2. Rationale

- University and college landscapes have the potential to be transformed into nature-rich green spaces improving all aspects of our natural environment. The planting of native trees and plants, restoring and creating priority habitats will encourage key species to thrive leading to increased ecological activity, reversing local species decline. Through this project, campuses will act as refuges for wildlife with corridors linking them to adjacent urban and rural green spaces.
- [According to SOS-UK research](#), 80% of students want their institution to be doing more on sustainable development and 60% of students want to learn more about sustainability, but only 34% say 'understanding how human activity is affecting nature' has been covered during their time in higher or further education so far. Wilding Campuses will provide opportunities for students to connect with nature and develop valuable employability skills, whilst inspiring young people toward a career helping to mitigate and adapt to the climate emergency and ecological crisis.
- Being at university can be a challenge at any time, in 2019 [1 out of 5 students](#) had a mental health diagnosis, but a [2020 survey](#) by the National Union of Students showed the pandemic has resulted in over half (52%) of UK students saying their mental health has declined. [Green spaces have proven positive impact on mental wellbeing](#), and are associated with reduced levels of anxiety, depression and fatigue. In [The People and Nature Survey for England](#) Dec 2021, four in ten adults said nature/wildlife (37%) and visiting green and natural spaces (38%) had been even more important to their wellbeing since coronavirus restrictions began. The tracker also shows that one positive of the pandemic was more people accessing local green

spaces, however this has started to return to pre-pandemic figures. Attention on, and easy access to, nature is needed to ensure people retain the benefits of access to green space as lives get back to 'normal'.

- UK universities cover large areas, with an estimated 50,000 hectares of land comprising of urban and rural spaces. Campuses have the potential to provide good-quality green space to a large population, including students, university staff and local communities. University land can often however be seen as off limits by the public and local organisations. Wilding Campuses would provide the opportunity for collaborative work across local regions and increased access to nature for more underserved communities.
- Our [recent sustainable food on campus survey](#) showed 78% of students say they're willing to change their diet to make it more low impact on the environment and the people involved in food production. University landscapes, even outside of farmland, have the potential to provide food for wildlife and humans. Much of our historical knowledge around sustainably growing and foraging for food and medicine has been lost, for example [hawthorn](#) can support over 300 insects, mammals and birds, and the young leaves and haws (once cooked) can be consumed by humans, but it is rarely thought of as a food source.
- There is significant student and staff support for this proposal, especially as a result of Covid-19, and the increased appreciation of connection to nature. SOS-UK hosted a 'Rewilding Campuses' webinar on the 9th February 2021 to gauge the need for and interest in the project. Ninety-six students and staff, from over 40 institutions attended the webinar giving us valuable feedback on the needs and expectations of the institutions. From this webinar 20 universities submitted an Expression of Interest form to work with us on this area.

3. Proposed scheme

Wilding Campuses aims to increase the abundance and diversity of plants, wildlife and people on our university and college landscapes. We want to ensure that, in addition to increasing biodiversity at four pilot institutions, we are providing tangible ways to empower individuals to tackle the climate crisis and reconnect them to nature, one of our oldest and most fragile forms of heritage.

Institutions will work in partnership with their students' unions through this programme, who will have an important role in owning and shaping the work, engaging conservation and environmental clubs and societies, and supporting volunteers. The programme will look at the space in-between university/college owned farmland and edible campus areas, which has historically been characterised by biodiverse poor management e.g. mown lawns.

Increasing plants and wildlife might look like the following examples, although we are very keen for institutions to make changes on the ground which would best benefit their local ecology:

- Edible campuses: Planting of edible plants with a focus on native species which also have biodiversity benefits, creating safe and responsible foraging opportunities.
- Traditional orchards: Provide patch habitats creating or restoring traditional orchards by planting a species composition of the trees primarily in, but not exclusively to, the family Rosaceae.
- Blue space projects: Restore, improve or build blue infrastructure, such as ponds supporting native aquatic species of plants and wildlife.
- Tree planting: Plant native species of trees, restore existing woodland, and create forest gardens.

- Grasslands: Change in estate management practice from weekly mowing to hay meadow management. Introduce more wildflower meadows as part of the landscape, planting native plants to support the great variety of native pollinators.
- Hedgerows: Plant native species of hedgerow and shrubs, including edible varieties, providing wildlife corridors between existing and emerging areas of woodland, meadows and parks.
- Mosaic habitat: Provide a range of elements within the university landscape creating large- scale mosaic habitats meeting the needs of a number of native species.
- Wildlife: Provide a range of installations and refugia, such as bird, hedgehog and bat boxes, insect hotels and reptile and amphibian refugia.

Equally as importantly, Wilding Campuses will be working to improve the knowledge, skills and wellbeing of students, staff and the local community. This could include, but would not be limited to:

- Reconnection with cultural traditions and practices: Increased understanding of traditional practices such as safe and respectful foraging, hedge laying and other global traditions with diverse practices for example tree dressing.
- Skill development: Development of practical skills such as planting trees, managing grasslands and maintaining heritage fruit and nut trees, and development of soft skills such as communication.
- Increasing wellbeing resilience and connection with nature: From individual opportunities to connect with outdoor wild spaces on a day-to-day basis, to organised activities e.g. guided walks, group meditation practices and activities cultivated around mental health such as group walks and tree bathing.
- Education for sustainable development: Embedding in learning within both the formal and informal curriculum through dissertations on campus activities, inclusion within course materials and provision of outdoor learning spaces. We would like to see students taking a central role and benefitting from the wilding, so biodiversity monitoring (baseline and follow up) will be undertaken by trained student volunteers at each site. We would look to facilitate links with specific courses around land management, conservation and forestry as well as subjects that are not often as connected to nature e.g. psychology, archaeology, anthropology, graphic design, art courses, etc.
- Community: Linking up with other local organisations e.g. councils, schools. Tie into wider area plans e.g. creation of wildlife corridors, local biodiversity action plans, Hedgehog Friendly campuses, and b-lines.
- Joined up thinking: Connection with farms on university/college land or in the neighbouring area to look at management of aspects such as water and hedgerows on a landscape level.
- Increased access to nature for underserved groups: Connecting those who have traditionally been excluded from nature e.g. due to factors associated with age, ethnicities, social background and/or disabilities.
- Connectivity: Opportunities for the tertiary and higher education sectors to collaborate and share resources. Potential scope for a national campaign element post pilot.
- Establishment of enterprises: Using sustainably managed items to create products e.g. preserves made of foraged goods, windfall apple juice, and baskets made of coppiced wood.

4. Outcomes

Wilding Campuses has two overarching aims:

- to increase the abundance and diversity of plants and wildlife
- to empower individuals to tackle the climate crisis and reconnect them to nature

To support the achievement of these long-term goals, our project will contribute the following outcomes, however each location may have different outcomes depending on the activities delivered.

- Activities and interventions lead to an increase in diversity of plants.
- Activities and interventions lead to an increase in habitats available for wildlife on campuses.
- People report an increase in their access/exposure to nature
- Students report an increased understanding of and connection to the natural world
- The increased exposure to nature results in improvements in wellbeing
- Students develop practical knowledge and skills associated with improving biodiversity
- Students feel part of the solution in tackling the climate crisis through their participation in the project activities.
- Students improve their 'soft skills' such as team-working, communication and self-confidence

5. Proposed pilot timeline

	2022				2023				2024			
TASK	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4
Application process												
Detailed project planning												
Recruitment												
Project start												
Volunteer recruitment												
Construction (wilding activities)												
Biodiversity training development												
Biodiversity training & monitoring												
Impact and evaluation												
Develop long term sustainability plan												
Annual reporting												
Final report												

6. Funding

Initially we are seeking a minimum of £234K for a pilot undertaken over two years at four campuses. Ideally this will include at least one college, and one local partnership between two or more different institutions. Ultimately, we would like to create opportunities for institutions in all four UK nations to be involved in this project, in urban, semi-rural and rural locations.

Each of the four institutional partnerships (the college/university and the students' union) will receive around £38K to deliver the pilot over two years. Institutions will have sufficient grant income to employ a local project manager for 1 day a week to coordinate efforts. The funding will additionally provide for items like trees and hedgerows for planting, biodiversity monitoring equipment, materials needed for the creation of wildlife habitats, and communication materials (including signage and interpretation boards). There will also be budget for provision of local specialist advice (e.g. heritage skills training like hedge laying, advice from a local ecologist etc), for volunteer engagement, for inclusivity to ensure a wider range of people are involved in heritage, and for delivery of local knowledge sharing events.

The programme will be supported centrally by SOS-UK for two and half days a week to coordinate the programme, create and facilitate a Wilding Campuses network (inc. an in person event), and to build national recognition of the programme in the tertiary education sector, sharing results and seeking additional funding post pilot. SOS-will develop and deliver biodiversity training for students and will aim to tie this into national monitoring programmes e.g. the BioBlitz and Ancient Tree inventory. Students who partake will receive recognition through a certificate or equivalent. This training could also be delivered at other UK campuses as a standalone event through SOS-UK's Learning Academy, extending the reach of the training. SOS-UK will also deliver the monitoring and evaluation aspects of the project.

7. Contact

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