



Wilding Campuses

Our impact and learning

May 2026



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1

About Wilding Campuses

Wilding Campuses: A nature recovery pilot, bringing people, plants & wildlife to UK campuses

With funding from the National Lottery Heritage Fund, this Nottingham-based pilot focuses on restoring nature into spaces where staff and students work and learn. Led by SOS UK, Wilding Campuses piloted a partnership between the University of Nottingham, Nottingham College and Bluecoat Aspley Academy.

Biodiversity and healthy ecosystems are crucial for the survival of all life on earth. But nature is under threat, not least in the UK where we are one of the most nature depleted countries in the world. Nottinghamshire, the location of our pilot project, has seen a 97% decline in flower-rich meadows and 90% decline in heathland since the 1920's and there are a number of species and habitats of local conservation concern. As a community, we are also increasingly disconnected from nature.

Over two years (spring 2024 – spring 2026), Wilding Campuses project aimed to address this by:

- Increasing the abundance and diversity of local target species and enhancing habitats with them in mind
- Empowering students, staff and young people traditionally excluded from nature to tackle the ecological crisis
- Increasing understanding of connection to and access to nature
- Students increase their feelings of being part of the solution to the climate and nature crises
- Increasing feelings of wellbeing

We also aimed to contribute to a number of the National Lottery Heritage Fund's core aims of:

- A wider range of people will be involved in heritage
- People will have developed skills
- The local area will be a better place to live, work or visit



Wilding Campuses is led by SOS UK...

We're a UK charity **transforming education** so people protect the climate and nature. We unite people from every background, inside and outside education, because **protecting our earth matters** to each and every one of us. As educators, environmentalists, and activists, we use our expertise to **get things done** - from changing curriculums across the world, to making sure all school children have access to nature.



Wilding Campus partners

Three education institutions formed the Wilding Campuses partnership, all based in Nottingham.

University of Nottingham

The University of Nottingham is a large, public, research-intensive university in England, with around 36,000 students based in Nottingham. Its UK estate includes the 300-acre University Park Campus, and the rural Sutton Bonington Campus, featuring lakes, parkland, formal gardens and agricultural land. Sustainability is a core priority, and the university has committed to becoming Nature Positive, delivering habitat restoration, rewilding, reduced mowing, native planting, ecological monitoring and long-term biodiversity management plans across its campuses.

Nottingham College

Nottingham College is a large further-education college serving Nottingham and the wider city region, supporting over 30,000 learners annually across vocational, technical, sixth-form, adult and apprenticeship provision. It operates across a number of campuses with a mix of city-centre and suburban sites. The college is committed to delivering a sustainable approach reflective of the local economy and tailored to provide innovative outcomes for their student cohort. Sustainability is a strategic priority, with the college committing to carbon net zero by 2030 including a goal of raising awareness of our climate literacy to our local economy.

Bluecoat Aspley Academy

Bluecoat Aspley Academy is a non-selective Church of England secondary school and sixth form in Nottingham, educating around 1,350–1,400 pupils aged 11–19 as part of the Archway Learning Trust. The school sits on an established urban campus. The academy has an active student-led Eco Committee and has been recognised through the Eco-Schools Green Flag Award (with distinction) for its commitment to environmental education, resource efficiency and student engagement in sustainability and stewardship.



2

What we did

What we did

To restore nature into spaces where staff and students work and learn, Wilding Campuses delivered:

- A delivery partnership across three academic institutions, coordinated by SOS UK
- A Youth Wilding Network to develop youth leadership within the project
- Land management and habitat enhancements
- Opportunities to learn and engage with nature for students, staff and community members including:
 - Practical sessions to provide opportunities to develop core skills that will support nature
 - Knowledge sharing and training sessions to facilitate learning between partners and local stakeholders
 - Engagement and wellbeing activities giving our target audience an opportunity to spend time in and experiences the benefits of nature

SOS UK

SOS UK brought the Wilding Campuses partnership together, creating regular opportunities for staff across the three campuses to share ideas, learn from one another and build the project collaboratively. This included co-ordinating network meetings, one-to-one support for each partner, staff training, recruiting young people to the Youth Wilding Network, providing biodiversity monitoring and learning sessions, and three partnership events hosted by the campuses in turn.

University of Nottingham

Wilding Campuses at the University of Nottingham included:

- **14 practical skills sessions with more than 380 staff and students** taking part across multiple campus sites, ranging from bulb planting in Memorial Wood involving staff and student groups including the Staff BAME Network and Jewish Society, to practical wildlife conservation sessions including nest box building, hedgehog surveying, hedgehog house construction and pond improvements
- **9 knowledge sharing and training sessions involving more than 100 staff and students**, such as installing new biodiversity interpretation boards across campus, including bird ID signage, insect house information boards and a habitat interpretation board
- **10 engagement and wellbeing activities with over 390 participants**, with highlights including outdoor meditation, sound bathing, shamanic drumming and Pilates sessions delivered during the Nature Wellbeing Festival. The team also delivered guided nature walks and forest bathing sessions encouraged mindfulness and connection with green spaces across campus
- **7 land management and habitat enhancement activities** across multiple campus sites, including expanding orchard planting to increase fruit tree diversity and creating new community growing spaces, alongside developing edible and wildlife corridors across campus through phased hedge and orchard planting, improving habitat connectivity between green spaces

Nottingham College

Wilding Campuses at Nottingham College delivered:

- **15 practical skills sessions engaging almost 370 students and staff**, including practical conservation activities including mushroom log inoculation, willow coppice establishment, bug snug construction and swift and bat habitat installation. In addition, workshops on soil health, plant propagation and wildlife gardening supported wider understanding of ecology, food growing and habitat management were delivered.
- **13 knowledge sharing activities and engaged over 1600 staff and students**, such as sharing project learning through podcasts, including the award-winning Roots and All, and public engagement events including Wild Wednesday, Green Hustle Festival and the Nottingham Organic Gardeners spring lectures
- **10 engagement and wellbeing activities with over 160 students and staff**, such as establishing garden clubs across multiple campuses, creating relaxed outdoor spaces focused on gardening, wellbeing and social connection and collaborative sessions with artists, poets and external facilitators encouraged creative engagement with nature and supported student wellbeing
- **9 land management improvements across campuses**, for example a substantial shift in grassland and hedgerow management made across all college sites to a longer-term annual meadow maintenance approach, including reduced mowing and protection of hedgerows during bird nesting season. This change totalled around 5 hectares of land management change!

Bluecoat Aspley Academy

At Bluecoat Aspley Academy, Wilding Campuses delivered:

- **13 practical skills sessions engaging just under 200 students and staff**, for example, SEN students participated in sensory and creative outdoor activities including foraging for art materials and biodiversity-focused planting sessions. Similarly, BioBlitz events and mammal tracking workshops helped students develop skills in species identification, biodiversity recording and ecological monitoring using iNaturalist and footprint tunnels
- **5 knowledge sharing activities engaging over 170 students and staff**, such as installing project and wildlife interpretation signage focused on hedgehogs, bats and butterfly conservation to support learning during workshops and events
- **11 engagement and wellbeing activities**, engaging over 200 students and staff including nature poetry workshops linked to the UNESCO Nature Poetry Laureate initiative and an afterschool screening of Fungi: The Web of Life, and staff-focused wildflower pressing workshop and wildlife walkarounds focused on biodiversity and nature connection
- **5 land management improvements across the school grounds**, including transforming a disused former classroom base into a perennial wildflower meadow with additional habitat features including bee posts, deadwood habitats, a bucket pond, willow structures and surrounding tree and hedgerow planting

University of Nottingham

Before



After



Nottingham College

Before



After



Bluecoat Aspley Academy

Before



After



Partnership Network events



Over the pilot, SOS UK and the partners planned 3 in person Wilding Campuses Partnership Network events. Each campus hosted one event, with university, college and school staff and students coming to visit another campus for the day, alongside a range of external guests.



Wilding Campuses Launch University of Nottingham, February 2025

Bringing together partners, students, staff and guests together to mark the start of the project and introduce its aims. The event included a presentation from SOS UK and a screening of the Wilding film, followed by practical outdoor sessions led by university grounds staff, where participants learned orchard tree planting and hedge laying techniques.



Big Wild Wednesday Nottingham College, June 2025

The College's City Hub hosted an event showcasing the project's wilding improvements, alongside hands-on activities with **Sherwood Wildlife Gardens** such as pollinator planting and gabion habitat building. The programme also included **GrowNotts** workshops, a locally sourced picnic, and nature-themed stalls run by students and guest contributors.



Wilding Campuses Celebration Bluecoat Aspley Academy, March 2026

Presentations from SOS UK and the school's Eco Committee highlighted project outcomes, nature connection, and pupils' experiences, alongside a session from **SUGi** on urban forestry and pocket forests. The day also included outdoor planting and habitat creation activities led by SUGi and **Sherwood Wildlife Gardens** for staff and students.



Youth Wilding Network

As part of the pilot, SOS UK supported the creation of the regional Youth Wilding Network made up of up to 10 young people from the region, to bring in youth voice from groups who are often less represented in nature-based work. These young people were invited to contribute ideas, stay connected to project activity, and act as Youth Ambassadors across the partnership. At Bluecoat Aspley Academy, 5 students were recruited through the school's Eco Group, with a member of staff providing safeguarding. Nottingham University recruited 4 students alongside an additional community member from Nottingham Trent University, and Nottingham College recruited 5 students during the project.

The Wilding Ambassadors joined our mid-project termly online partnership meetings to provide student voice input into planning of ideas and events, and offer suggestions for student engagement. They were also offered opportunities to volunteer at events hosted across the partnership, for example the Green Hustle festival and the University's Nature Wellbeing festival. At the school, the Wilding Ambassadors played an active role in the school's Eco Committee and led on internal knowledge sharing through assemblies to the wider school community and presenting the BioBlitz training back to their peers.

Sustaining engagement across the Network was a key challenge for the pilot, in particular amongst students at the university and college where the level of time commitment required for an unpaid role, alongside competing pressures such as study demands and part-time work, limited students' capacity to remain consistently involved. At school level, engagement was more stable where a staff member provided ongoing oversight and acted as a consistent point of contact for communications, which helped support safeguarding and continuity.

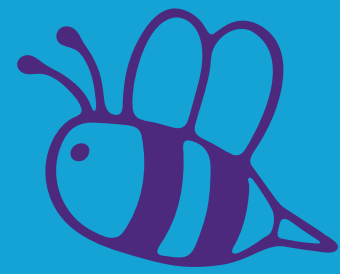
BioBlitz surveying

Supporting organisations

Throughout the pilot, SOS UK and the three partner institutions worked with a range of local organisations to strengthen delivery and broaden the project's impact. **Nottinghamshire Wildlife Trust** helped ground the work in local ecological priorities, offering advice on biodiversity decline, priority species and practical ways campuses could be managed to better support nature. **EMEC Ecology Environmental Consultants** provided tailored land management workshops for each institution, helping partners shape their plans with specialist ecological input, and also carried out baseline biodiversity surveys at Bluecoat Aspley Academy.

The project also benefited from support from **Nottinghamshire Bat Group** and **Action for Swifts**, which brought expert guidance on monitoring and supporting local bat and swift populations. **Sherwood Wildlife Gardens** played an important delivery role across all three sites, supporting habitat creation, leading workshops and activities to help develop greener, more wildlife-friendly spaces. In addition, partner institutions worked with **Green Hustle Festival** and **Attenborough Nature Reserve** on student-led art exhibition and wellbeing events, helping connect the project to wider public engagement across the city.

These contributions helped ensure the project was shaped by practical insight, responded to local ecological conditions, and created stronger foundations for action beyond the life of the pilot.



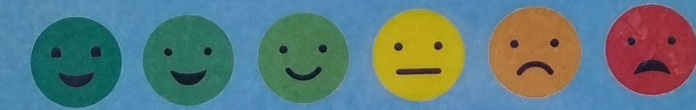
Swift boxes at Nottingham College

Evaluating Wilding Campuses

Our evaluation research was designed to help us understand if we had met our desired goals and outcomes, but also to find out how and why the project was working, alerting us to where improvements could be made along the way. We carried out:

- Surveys with activity participants including students, staff and members of the local community
- Interviews and group reflections with key stakeholder staff in our partnership
- Most important change exercises with students who've been involved in more depth
- Skills mapping with student leaders in the Youth Wilding Network

This report sets out our findings from the evaluation research, focusing on the impact Wilding Campuses achieved (chapter 3), what we learnt through delivering the project (chapter 4). Finally, we describe the next steps for SOS UK and the partner institutions on supporting nature to thrive across the educational estate.



**Tell us about your
Wilding Campuses
experience!**

Scan the QR code and answer our
short survey about this activity.





3

Our impact

3.1 Overall impact



2371

people across the project as a whole, from partners and supporting organisations, to activity participants

97

nature-focused activities delivered over the course of the project timeline

4

categories of wildlife - plants, birds, insects and fungi - showed increased abundance across the three education settings

2743

hours of volunteering contributed by 2345 students, staff and members of the local community

12

students joined a Youth Wilding Network, providing youth leadership for the project

70%

of volunteers said taking part made them feel like they're helping make their local area a better place to live

92%

of volunteers said taking part helped them to learn more about nature

81%

of volunteers said taking part helped them to understand what needs to be done to help nature

67%

of volunteers said taking part helped them feel like they're helping tackle climate change

65%

of volunteers said taking part helped them feel like they're helping tackle nature loss

Read on for further details of our impact in the following areas:

- Increasing the abundance and diversity of wildlife and enhancing habitats
- Empowering students, staff and young people traditionally excluded from nature to tackle the ecological crisis
- Increasing understanding of connection to and access to nature
- Enabling action through skills development
- Students feel part of the solution to the climate and nature crises
- Increasing feelings of wellbeing

3.2 Increasing the abundance and diversity of wildlife and enhancing habitats

A range of activities were delivered throughout the pilot that support increased abundance and diversity of wildlife, as well as enhancing habitats for it to thrive. The three partner institutions worked to increase wildlife and habitats through activities such as hedge, tree and orchard planting, wildflower meadow creation and maintenance, pond creation and improvement, soil improvement, willow coppice establishment, and the construction of bird, bat, bee, bug and hedgehog habitats. Biodiversity monitoring carried out at the start and end of the project revealed an increased abundance of plant, bird, insect and fungal life across the three education settings as a whole, and this should continue as the habitats become more established.

Species type	Start of project (number of species)	End of project (number of species)
Plants	180	198
Insects	80	104
Birds	22	25
Fungi	9	14

Staff working across our partner institutions also shared their reflections on the changes in wildlife and their habitats throughout the course of the project:

“Ecologically we’ve seen little signs of differences already with the pond, seeing frog spawn coming out for the first time in years and seeing more varied and biodiverse lawns and wildflowers coming up.”

“We’ve easily got over 20 different species of wildflower. We’ve definitely got over 5 more species of trees. We’ve got shrub roses... nut trees, hazels that are providing food for little squirrels and birds.”

“Our city centre beds were kind of dead when I took them on. We did initial biodiversity survey, and I found a centipede and two worms. And then now it’s like millions of grasshoppers, ladybirds, bees, there’s birds and butterflies buzzing around. There’s tonnes of caterpillars in the summer.”



3.3 Empowering students, staff and young people traditionally excluded from nature to tackle the ecological crisis

Research has shown that personal characteristics, such as age, ethnicity and disability are linked to access to green space and nature. The British Ecological Society reported that "Access [to nature] is unequally distributed: poorer, urban, and ethnically diverse communities face significant barriers to accessing nature, despite having the most to gain from nature exposure".

Through Wilding Campuses we aimed to empower students, staff and young people in general within groups that have been excluded from nature. We recorded a range of different personal characteristics and experiences that are associated with exclusion from the environment and nature sector, or across UK society overall.

Reflecting on this, project staff shared:

"The Wilding Campus Project has given students and staff the chance to come together to take part in various nature-based activities right on our campuses. People from diverse backgrounds, many without much previous access to nature, have been able to take part in activities such as bulb planting, wildflower seeding and foraging walks."

The following people were involved in Wilding Campuses activities:

44%

had personal experience of mental health issues or condition

18%

had personal experience of physical disability, impairment or long-term health condition

13%

had personal experience as a carer or having parental responsibilities

12%

were currently or previously in receipt of Free School Meals

2%

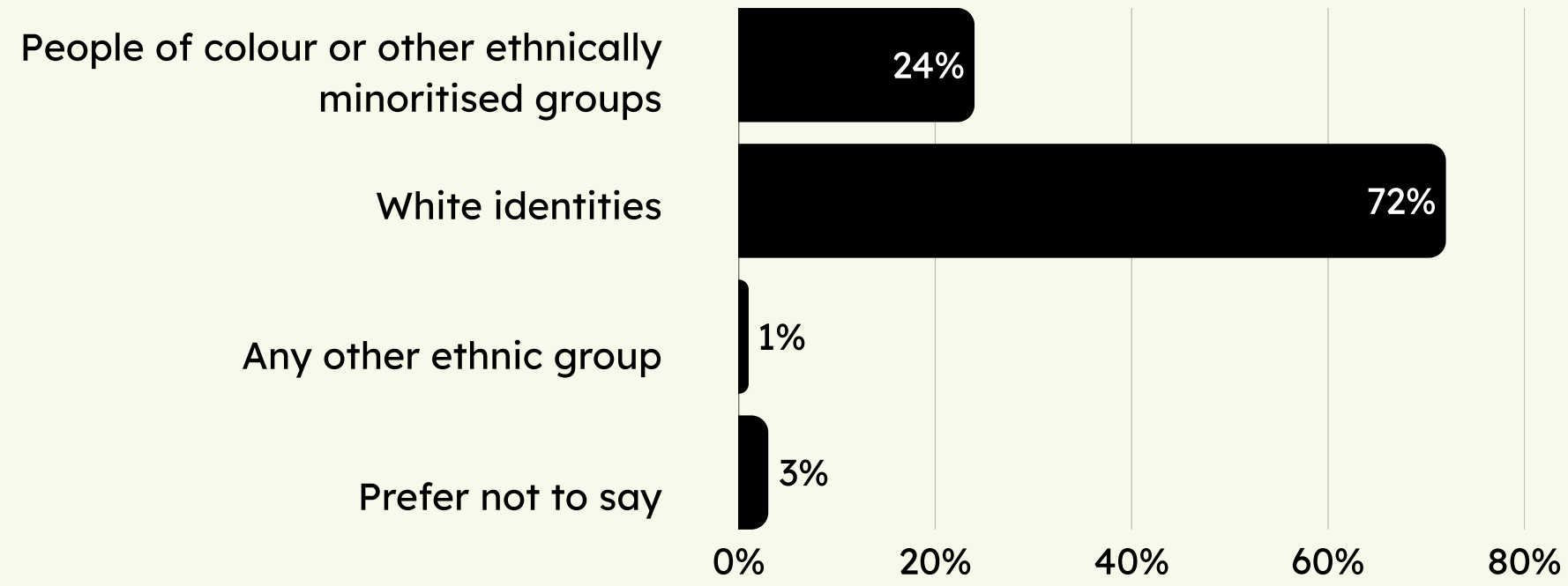
had personal experience of the care system or being in care

1%

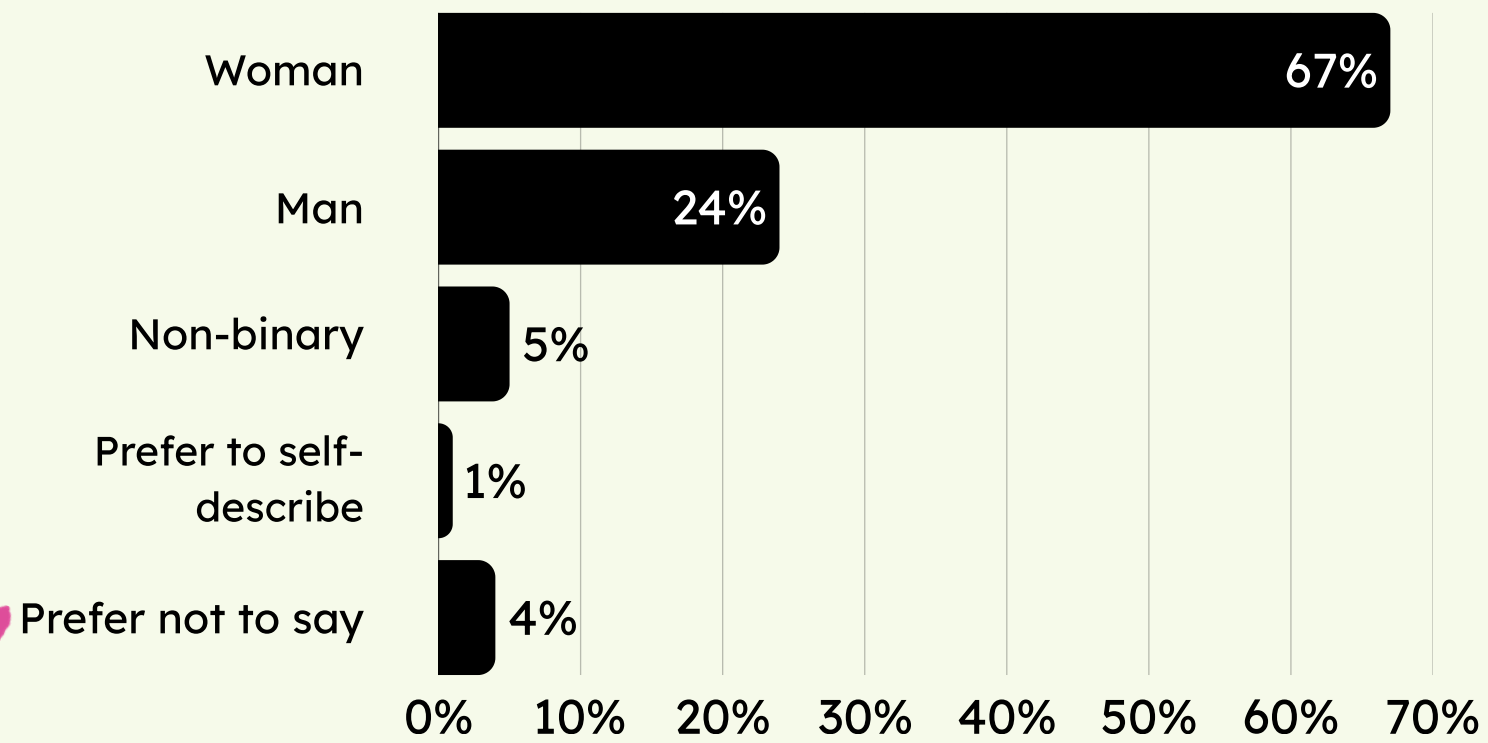
Came to the UK as a refugee or asylum seeker



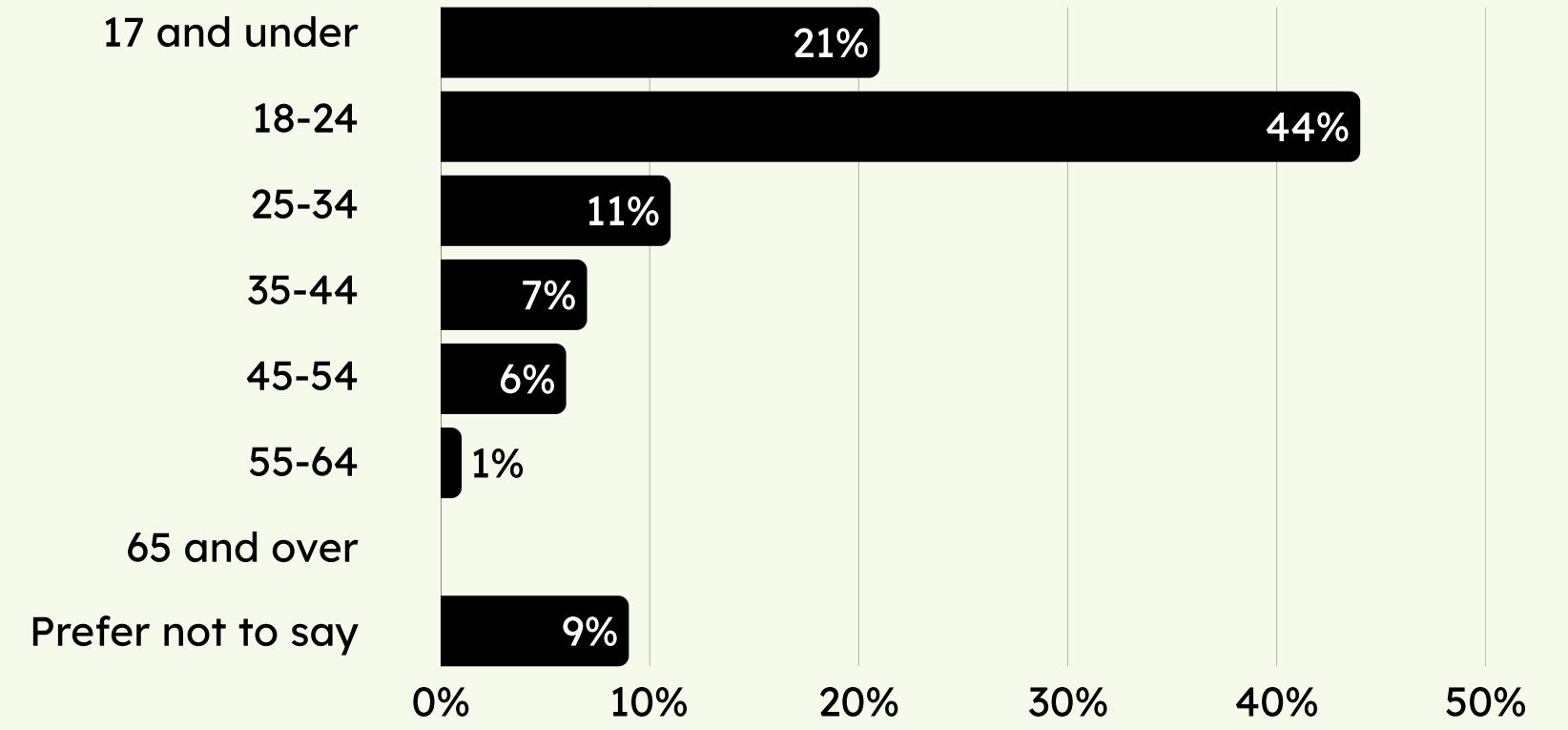
Ethnicity



Gender identity



Age



3.4 Increased understanding of, connection to and access to nature

Increasing understanding of, connection to and access to nature was an important element of Wilding Campuses. When people have meaningful opportunities to experience, learn about and feel part of nature they are more likely to value, protect and take action for it.

92%

said taking part helped them to learn more about nature

85%

said taking part had helped to spend more time in nature

81%

said taking part helped them to understand what needs to be done to help nature

78%

said taking part helped them feel more connected to nature

68%

said taking part helped them learn more about how humans are damaging nature

Participants also shared the following details about their experiences:

"The best thing about taking part was seeing all the different species and learning more about their populations."

"Spending time in nature, observing bees, flowers."

"I enjoyed going outside and connecting with nature."

Project staff reflected on the impact of bringing nature into sustainability conversations, broadening understanding of the concept beyond a focus on carbon emissions:

"I feel like we've raised awareness of it with our senior leadership team, with our student body, and that we've got a lot more people on board with that whole aspect of sustainability and the nature based solutions side of sustainability, which I think before was very much overshadowed by the carbon footprint side of sustainability."



3.5 Enabling action through skills development

Skills development has been a central element of Wilding Campuses, with activities designed to upskill the full range of stakeholders involved in the project, from workshop participants to Youth Wilding Network members. Our feedback survey for participants in the wide range of project activities delivered found that:

88%

of participants in our biodiversity training sessions said taking part had helped them to learn how to measure and record what nature is in their local area

79%

of participants said taking part had helped them to 'develop skills needed to help nature'

Participants shared:

"I learned how to make hedgehog tunnels for hedgehogs to come in and how to make them which I didn't know before and what the difference footprints between different animal species."

"I learned how to observe animal prints."

"I learned about different species of trees and tree planting techniques."

"As I'm graduating in Physics but would like to get more experience in conservation and sustainability, this experience has been vital for my CV and general knowledge."



As well as participants, our partnership institution staff also experienced skills development:

“I feel like it’s been a real learning experience for me and part of the kind of upskilling come from all the connections that I’ve made. It’s people like the Wildlife Trust and also a lot of the kind of local organic sustainable professional gardens as well that we’ve had involved in the project.”

Alongside nature focused skills, we saw improvements in soft-skills such as team-working, communication and self-confidence:

83%

said that ‘Taking part in this activity helped me communicate my ideas and opinions to others’

81%

said that ‘Taking part in this activity helped me work with others in a team’

71%

said that ‘Taking part in this activity helped me feel more confident’

Reflecting on the change seen amongst student participants, partner staff members and parents shared:

“We’ve seen confidence in students, which has been really, really great. There’s particularly one student who struggled with being in school and they engaged incredibly well with the session to the point where their parents wrote in.”

“They [child] have told me how they’re made, what materials you need and what benefit they [gabion habitats] have, including which insects it will attract. We’re building at least one in our garden as soon as we can get the materials and find a spare weekend.”

“We’ve had students on the autistic spectrum who after they’ve done a session with us, like they never get to work outdoors. They’re in the classroom all day long. And after they’ve done a Wilding Campuses session out in the grounds, then their tutors have come to us and said they’ve never come out of their shell like that before.”

3.6 Students feel part of the solution to the climate and nature crises

As well as taking local action, our activities supported participants to see how their action contributes to global issues such as climate change and the nature crisis. Making this connection matters because it turns local action into a sense of agency and supports links to wider change.

67%

said taking part helped them feel like they're helping tackle climate change

65%

said taking part helped them feel like they're helping tackle nature loss

Feedback from participants also shows the impact on their feelings of agency in these areas:

"I was able to learn how to help mitigate climate change and learn the huge impact human actions have on the world."

"The best thing was digging a hole and planting the tree. It was very fun and made me feel I was making a difference."

"The best thing was feeling like you're helping a good cause."

Project staff reflected on Wilding Campuses as an empowering experience for

students:

"It's been so important to give the students that sense that they have agency and that there are little practical feet on the ground, things that they can do that actually make their immediate surroundings a whole lot better, and that it stretches a lot wider than that as well."



Nottingham College

3.7 Local areas are better place to live, work or visit

Wilding Campuses delivered visible improvements to publicly accessible spaces, helping make partner sites better for wildlife and more inviting for the people who use them every day. At Nottingham College, newly planted borders at the City Hub brightened a busy city-centre route and prompted positive feedback from passers-by such as “I smile every time I walk past”. At the University of Nottingham, improvements to spaces such as the edible hedgerow corridor and orchard area enhanced prominent, well-used parts of campus connected to the Memorial Woodland and local wildlife site, The Downs.

Partner activities also strengthened community cohesion by bringing different groups of people from across the city together around nature in shared public spaces. This included joint student-created art exhibitions by Bluecoat Aspley Academy and Nottingham College at Attenborough Nature Reserve, and participation in Nottingham’s Green Hustle Festival, which helped engage public visitors and young people from across the city. At the University of Nottingham, the 2025 Nature Wellbeing Festival on the publicly accessible Downs area created another high-profile opportunity for community engagement, with an estimated 200 local people taking part in activities including forest bathing, outdoor pilates, foraging and pollinator surveying. Together, these activities extended the project’s reach beyond campus and helped connect nature recovery with wellbeing, creativity and local participation contributing to making the area a better place to live, work or visit.

Our feedback surveys for project participants found that **70% said taking part made them feel like they are helping make their local area a better place to live, work or visit**. The nature of the campuses involved means that publicly accessible land has been improved, for nature and also local residents:

“It’s improved the image of the college. We’ve done a lot of work on some of our city centre campuses, which I think has been quite public facing and they’re looking a lot better now than they used to, and working better for nature as well.”

Nottingham College City Hub



3.8 Improved wellbeing

The link between spending time in nature and physical and mental wellbeing is well documented. As a result of taking part, the majority of people involved in our activities reported an impact on their wellbeing. For example...

87%

said they feel happier

76%

said they feel healthier

They also shared more detail about why these changes had arisen:

"I loved planting trees because it was sunny and me and my friends were singing."

"I felt happy to get the opportunity to plant trees."

Project staff and parents within the partner institutions also shared reflections on the wellbeing benefits of the work carried out under Wilding Campuses, including providing improved access to natural spaces and opportunities to engage with nature for students and staff.

"I think the level of understanding and why we're doing it has improved broadly... we've also seen cultural changes in people in that they want to go and spend time in this space. You know, a lot of staff areas are indoors and we've seen members of our HR team, they've gone out, they've utilised this space."

"I think it's given a lot of students an opportunity to take themselves out of the craziness of revision and exams... it's just a really, really nice way to engage students without having the social pressures of drinking or it being really late on. It's just such a wholesome, sociable thing where anyone can involved, come along with their friends and just enjoy doing something out in nature, which feels so fulfilling and really like a recharge of your battery."

"I just had to email you to thank you for the Eco Committee session making Gabions [insect habitats] tonight... They find school tricky and we normally get less than a grunt about how his day was or worse they are so burnt out from a day at school we have negative emotions to deal with. Today they have been effervescent in his passion and joy."



A thick, hand-drawn yellow brushstroke circle with a slightly irregular, organic shape. It is positioned on the left side of the slide, partially overlapping the orange background.

4

Our learning



4.1 Empowering students to take action for nature

Student empowerment and leadership have been central to how Wilding Campuses operated. From the Youth Wilding Network providing cross-institutional input, to student leadership within each partner, supporting students to develop skills and lead decision-making has been a key outcome of the project.

"We've had 30 kids who are directly leading this project...so that climate education and that building resilience... They're going to be our future leaders...so it's exciting to empower and give that environmental leadership to instil that into the kids."

Lessons we've learned on engaging, empowering and enabling students include:

Working through student societies enables reach students beyond the 'usual suspects'

"We've certainly been trying to collaborate with non-environmental courses... so like collaborations with the Architecture Society and the Buddhism Society... we've been specifically targeting, for example, at the Business School, they have quite a heavy international student cohort so we've been specifically trying to work with them and get them to promote things."

Triangulating engagement activities leads to greater levels of participation, for example engaging academic and professional services staff alongside students.

"So when the lecturer is interested and then another member staff on the practical side of the team and students are interested, then that's kind of like the perfect bubble."

Academic pressures can hinder student engagement, despite the impacts of participation potentially supporting improved academic outcomes through wellbeing benefits

"The students that we kind of probably found hardest to engage at college are the ones on the higher-level academic courses with more study pressure."

Bluecoat Aspley Academy

Nature-based activities provided a different opportunity to learn for learners with additional educational requirements

“Our special educational needs learners, their lecturers were always kind of looking for fun and lovely activities to do with them. Our foundation level learners, our level 1 learners, they don't have as much academic pressure and then they, some of them are the ones that have not had a great educational experience school and they're not so engaged with the educational process, their tutors are always looking for ways to make their studies more fun and interesting.”

Having a visible presence on campus when delivering activities also contributes to improved participation

“The activity that really did stand out that did help to involve those students that wouldn't necessarily ever see the Wilding Campuses e-mail or the Instagram or anything like that was the bug house making session that was in Engineering. And a lot of people that attended had no idea that the session was running and they'd come from a lecture. And that one was actually, funnily enough, the most male attended one that we've had, I think. So just planting yourself in an area near a door and then getting people in seemed like a helpful method for that.”

Embedding activities within the curriculum is an important tool in student engagement and focusing on specific courses can be a way to target students with particular characteristics

“I couldn't kind of go to those learners and directly get them engaged. But once I'd got their teachers on board and made them like kind of talk to them and said, what can we do with you that will, you know, work within your curriculum and then did it as kind of almost part of their course, then that was a way we managed to get them on board.”

“Most people that come to our sessions tend to be female. There are males, but there's not a lot. We've tried to target the engineering department in the hope that we'll get more males kind of engaged in some of this stuff.”

Reaching out into new communities whilst also trying to establish the work within their institutions is difficult. Additional capacity and time are seen as necessary to achieve this outcome

“We definitely have missed out on engaging with communities...we've just not had the time. It takes so much of our effort to just try and engage with our own community, that to look outside, just we just can't do it.”

“If we manage to keep the momentum going after the end of the project and you come back and ask us [about engaging the wider community], we might have a different answer to these questions because we'll be able to say, well, actually, now we've got past that really hard stage of getting the news out there about this.”

Academic pressures can hinder student engagement, despite the impacts of participation potentially supporting improved academic outcomes through wellbeing benefits. This was particularly the case where roles required higher levels of commitment from students, such as the Youth Wilding Network:

“The students that we kind of probably found hardest to engage at college are the ones on the higher-level academic courses with more study pressure.”

“We engaged youth ambassadors however, the pressures of their studies and home lives tended to leave them with little time to commit to helping at all wilding events. The scheme could have been more successful if there were clearly defined, specific events that they were recruited to, and some form of remuneration attached to the role.”

At a school level, utilising existing structures such as Eco Committees, council and sixth form meant students recruited to roles were more able to be embedded in school leadership

Amongst older students, for example at college or university level offering paid, time-limited positions embedded in delivery is a means of successfully maintaining consistent engagement and contribution to project activities. Offered by the University of Nottingham, the success of the student staff role highlighted the importance of structured, resourced opportunities where sustained involvement is required.

Further communications learning includes:

- **Relationship-based outreach worked best:** Direct engagement through trusted networks and communities was more effective than broad, one-off communications.
- **Sustained, multi-channel communication mattered more than any single approach** Awareness grew over time as mailing lists, newsletters, fairs, posters and in-person contact reinforced each other.
- **Mailing lists and direct internal channels were especially effective for older students:** For example, at the University of Nottingham, the mailing list became the most reliable tool for sustained engagement.
- **Reducing barriers increased participation:** Nottingham College found success by targeting specific groups directly and offering inclusive, practical support like food within activity sessions.



4.2 City-based partnership working

Reflections from across the partnership show that collaboration was both a strength of the project and something that needed time and sustained input to develop with institution staff believing that the greatest benefits from the relationships developed are yet to come. Key reflections include:

Providing external expertise supported knowledge-sharing across the partnership even further

“We’ve had a real kind of community where been able to share and trade ideas. It’s been brilliant having Celine [SOS UK staff member] come over and show us how to use iNaturalist and do all the BioBlitz stuff as well has been fantastic.”

Across all three partner institutions, staff reflected that building a strong partnership took time. Many felt the first year of funding focused on laying the groundwork, and that the project’s impact could have been greater if it had started from a stronger base

“We formed some really, really great relationships cumulatively. I think it probably took a little bit longer than we anticipated. I think we’re about 12 months behind...It’s almost like if it was a three-year project,...I really feel that we’d be delivering something bigger.”

Connecting the three institutions provided a fertile ground for sharing knowledge and experience of implementing wilding activities on campus

“I think it’s been absolutely amazing to bounce ideas off each other. If the college has got a brilliant idea about doing a certain thing, then I was hearing that and thinking, maybe we could do a land management task that’s similar.”

“It was quite like nice that we had access to kind of look at what the uni was doing, look at what the school was doing and be inspired by that as well.”



Project staff team

A barrier to partnership development has been the capacity of project staff to contribute to relationship-building alongside delivering the project within their own institution. Where possible, opportunities to connect should be built into delivery.

“But for me, it felt like I was so kind of hectic doing stuff, doing, doing, doing, doing all the time. I really wanted to kind of get involved with the very hands-on side of it. And that maybe stopped me getting quite as much, you know, connecting quite as much with the other members of the partnership, because just because of time constraints.”

More opportunities for in-person knowledge-sharing and collaboration would have strengthened the project further. Alongside this, shorter but more frequent touchpoints were also suggested as being more effective at supporting collaboration

“It does make such a difference seeing people in-person and seeing the school and college in-person rather than chatting online... being able to do more in-person things with them would have been fantastic.”

A further barrier to collaboration has been staff changes throughout the project, hindering the ability to build effective relationships. Ensuring clear handover processes and shared documentation to maintain continuity when staff change is important. Pairing this with regular check-ins and multiple points of contact to avoid reliance on single individuals and support relationship building over time is essential to counter staff turnover.

“People’s positions have changed massively... we’re all moving pieces and trying to get that cross-collaboration when things are moving in ways that aren’t necessarily in our control is hard.”





4.3 Wilding activities and land changes in academic institutions

The two-years of project activity have generated the following learning about implementing wilding activities and changes to land management within academic institutions.

In some cases, skills and knowledge gaps need to be addressed. Where staff are supporting nature on campus from roles outside this area, clear and practical guidance is essential alongside the time pressures of their wider responsibilities and new areas of work


“I didn’t know a huge amount about biodiversity, broadly speaking, particularly in areas of biodiversity monitoring.”

“It could have been perhaps like with some dead kind of like simple step-by-step things for say like recruiting students. Here are four things you can try to recruit students. Here’s what you can do to kind of get your staff on board.”

Developing student roles to support action provides additional capacity for staff teams, and a real-world learning opportunity for students

“There was someone that was identified that would like to get involved in this project... but that meant they didn’t give up any of their other work really to do it. It became an add-on... I think we failed there and it took us then quite a long time to get going with things. Since we’ve had a student... we’ve just been able to rattle through everything that we needed to.”

“It’s made me really, really happy, feeling like I’m able to make just a little bit of a difference in an environmental setting at the university before going out into the real world and getting a job.”



Using a framework to guide action, along with specific funding and resources, has provided an impetus for progressing wilding activities

“Having a framework that’s very specific in deliverables has been really useful.”

“I think the main thing it’s [Wilding Campuses] done is it’s just forced us to do these things that we’ve always known or always wanted to do, but we haven’t had the headspace or the resource or the money to do it.”

Repurposing existing infrastructure can be an easy step to better support wildlife

“One of the pond areas that we’ve got, we’ve installed some access for wildlife... although that’s a relatively small action to do, it probably will be one of the more impactful ones because not only will it help those animals, but it will also help the grounds team to see that there are always solutions to some of these things. I think it was maybe thought that, can’t do anything about that pond. It’s ornamental, it’s not designed for wildlife, but that doesn’t mean that wildlife won’t use it.”

Institution-owned publicly accessible spaces provide an important opportunity for engagement, but present challenges for day-to-day management

“We’ve been really lucky that we have got that big public space at the front of one of our city centre campuses. So that’s been really good for doing something that benefits the wider community.”

“We’ve got a space which is very public. So our beds there get like regularly trampled on. There’s tonnes of litter in them all the time. It’s like all of the kind of like cities problems basically end up in your flower beds. So that’s been one tension.”

Shifting perspectives and cultural norms on how grounds should look can prove challenging and takes time

“I suppose it’s like trying to work with people that have done things in one way for a long time and they’ve kind of found it hard to adapt to ideas...like an approach where the maintenance of all of our grounds looks a little bit less controlled, or that everything’s not quite so neat and trim all the time.”

“And there’s that preconceived idea again of what mess is and selling the benefits. So that communication piece, I don’t think can be rushed. I think that’s a cultural change, not just an immediate, let me give you some hard facts about it and I expect you to change your decision.”

Getting estates teams on board and building their involvement in from the start is crucial to implementing changes to better support nature on campuses. Ensuring there is capacity within these teams to engage is also vital

“I think if we’d have had something at the beginning of the project again [which involved the grounds team], it might have helped inform some of the things we did a bit more. As much as we tried to involve them, it was really hard to get them to say, oh, this is something we’d like to do.”

“And it’s that they feel that I’ve come in and I’m treading on their toes, and they are not on board with kind of what we’re doing at all.”

“I think the resistance is happening where...they feel like what we’re doing is creating like an extra job for them, or that’s the perception.”

“The grounds team,...embrace the changes, but they don’t have the time necessarily to maintain and water.”

Changing management practices and habitat creation often takes more time and planning than anticipated, and delayed starts impacted progress, for example as a result of negotiations with site teams or contractors, and the time taken for for habitat changes to be approved.

Securing senior management buy-in is essential for driving progress, but can be difficult to achieve. Early support is particularly important when developing new areas of work and demonstrating impact can help build and sustain senior-level commitment. If running the project again, increasing direct interaction with grounds/site management teams and senior leadership teams by SOS UK would have helped make the case for the changes suggested through the project, and also offered the potential to upskill those key stakeholders with biodiversity knowledge and understanding.

“The hardest challenge is getting buy-in from senior management.”

“Because of the success of Wilding Campuses and I think because we’ve kind of ended up being an award-winning project, then our senior leadership team have found the funds to pay my wage for another year.”





5

Next steps

Next steps

With the Wilding Campuses pilot coming to an end in May 2026, there is strong commitment across the partnership to continue working to better support nature and, in turn, benefit students, staff and the local community.



"I'm more optimistic about what might come next rather than what we've necessarily achieved during the project... knowing that you've always got some people now that we can work together with."

"Now we've got a whole bank of ideas and future projects that we know we can carry on with. We've finally got the momentum built up as part of this initiative that I'm confident we'll be able to keep it going."

For partners, specific intentions include...

Formalising commitments to wilding on campus

"We're going to develop new biodiversity action plans for all our campuses and habitat management plans..."

Building on the volunteer base created during the pilot

"The main thing is we've got this nice list of 200 people that have subscribed to essentially do volunteering. So we need to make sure we keep offering them opportunities."

Working more to embed nature and wilding into curricula

"We've used some of the capital from the project to purchase two years' worth of wood/bird boxes to be built in DT. I think that's absolutely huge because it means the legacy can infiltrate into the curriculum... Entering the curriculum in a standardised curriculum environment has been the biggest blocker."

Founding protected areas to ensure long term impact

"We've managed to protect areas too... we planted some trees... [and] that areas has been protected, so the council will literally have a record to say you can't do anything in that space... so now we know for sure that no senior member of staff can build anything in that space."

SOS UK is working to build our key learnings and resources from Wilding Campuses into our wider work supporting action on nature across the education system. ...

Our new **Nature Friendly Grounds** programme, launching nationally in autumn 2026 is a particular example. This new accreditation programme for universities, colleges and schools sees institutions completing a variety of guided actions from a framework, which include running biodiversity monitoring activities such as BioBlitzes, making management and habitat improvements, engaging with local community partners and running activities for learner engagement. The Wilding Campuses project has enabled us to trial and evaluate a range of suggested actions, create new training workshops, and gain insights into best practice which can now be used to inform other educational estates.

We are also considering how we can continue to support our Nottingham-based Wilding Campuses partnership directly, for example through continued engagement with the pilot sites in our programmes and a potential for joint bids for further regional funding, allowing us to continue the progress we've made on these campus sites.

On a national scale, SOS UK we're looking for opportunities for city-wide Wilding Campuses partnership projects in other areas and exploring partnership models within Nature Friendly Grounds.





We're working to transform education, so people protect the climate and nature.

Students Organising for Sustainability (SOS UK) is a registered charity operating across the UK.
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