

Concept note: Nature Friendly Grounds

1. Context

The UK is one of the most [nature depleted](#) countries in the world. The UK government is working to redress this and has committed to protect 30% of the UK's land and sea for nature by 2030. Due to its size and distribution, our educational estate has huge potential to contribute to this target by restoring and reconnecting nature. School grounds cover a total of 61,000 hectares¹ and UK universities and colleges own more than 35,000 hectares of campus and farmland.

Whilst there has been considerable and substantive action by our educational institutions to address the climate emergency, comparatively little has been done by them to tackle the ecological crisis. To date, 16 secondary schools are working with SOS-UK through our [Wilding Schools programme](#) and one in eight schools in England have engaged in the Department for Education's [Nature Park initiative](#).

In tertiary education, 134 institutions have achieved one of our [Hedgehog Friendly Campus](#) awards and 29 universities have signed the University of Oxford's [Nature Positive Universities pledge](#). Additionally, we know that good numbers of tertiary education institutions have taken sporadic practical action to increase biodiversity, such as not mowing grass areas in spring and early summer, planting native trees, installing bird boxes and bringing in honeybees, with some of this action being instigated or led by student societies. At the other end of the spectrum, at least six universities have their own biodiversity action plans and a handful of universities have specialist staff roles on operational biodiversity. SOS-UK also has a new pathfinder project to demonstrate the benefits of taking a regional approach to nature restoration by working across the education system (a school, a college and a university in Nottingham) through our Heritage Lottery-funded [Wilding Campuses](#) programme.

Despite the above activity, the majority of UK education settings have yet to get properly started on restoring nature. With key staff in many institutions seemingly not knowing where to start, and most not having a mandate to instigate substantive action, we believe now is the time to develop a standardised action-centred rewilding framework for the sector, building on our experience and success with programmes like [Green Impact](#), [Responsible Futures](#) and [Drugs and Alcohol Impact](#).

We know that there is demand for new action-based nature programmes. The success of our Hedgehog Friendly Campus programme has led to staff at Swansea University asking us to develop a Bird Friendly Campus programme, and the Bat Conservation Trust have approached us to develop a Bat Friendly Campus programme. Following consultation and consideration, we don't believe a more species-specific approach is the right way to go in the long term. Instead, we propose developing a single holistic Nature Friendly Grounds programme that will drive practical rewilding action at a habitat level right across the education sector and beyond.

¹ <https://lfl.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/uk-school-grounds-land-cover-classification.pdf>

In November and December 2024, we engaged with lead staff from 14 different education institutions to shape this proposal. As we developed our thinking, we took further inspiration and ideas from what [York St John University has done for the tansy beetle](#) and the new [Green Grounds Certification from Re:wild Your Campus](#) in the US.

2. Proposed programme

Participating institutions will work through a new online toolkit of nature-friendly operational actions, grouped into **action themes**:

- Awareness and education;
- building and construction;
- grounds management;
- impact;
- leadership;
- monitoring and surveys;
- partnerships;
- policy;
- reporting;
- resourcing;
- student engagement;
- supply chain;
- target setting.

In addition to the standard criteria, we will provide **specialist habitat modules** to support the creation, or improvement, of the five initial habitat types that are most applicable to the generic educational estate:

- Grasslands, pastures and margins;
- hedgerows;
- open mosaic habitats;
- orchards and woodland;
- ponds and wetlands.

We will also develop **specialist class modules**, initially:

- Amphibians;
- Birds;
- Insects;
- Mammals.

And finally we will develop **specialist species modules** for red and amber list or threatened species that we think the educational estate can play a pivotal role in helping to recover. We have not decided on the exact species yet, as we need expert advice in that, but they could include species such as black poplar; crested cow-wheat; hedgehogs; swifts; tansy beetle; wood white.

The development of all our specialist modules will be led by relevant nature conservation organisations, and we will work in partnership with them through the programme, including co-delivering support webinars for participating institutions.

Criteria will be assigned scores based on difficulty to implement and relative impact, and there will be three different award levels: Bronze, Silver and Gold. Some actions will be essential to achieve each level, with most being optional to allow for institutional variability. Institutions will need to complete at least one of the specialist habitat, class or species modules to reach Silver, and two to obtain Gold.

After the deadline to submit completed toolkits, participating institutions will be audited by a team of their own students, trained by SOS-UK. Students completing our auditor training and the audits will receive a Nature Friendly Grounds Auditor digital badge in association with the **British Ecological Society**.

After the pilot phase, at the end of each annual cycle, there will be a national awards moment or event to recognise and celebrate individual and collective endeavours, including national awards for local biodiversity champions nominated by participating organisations.

3. Pilot plan (Jan 2025 - Jul 2027)

The development work for the new programme will start in early 2025, with the pilot cohort beginning the programme at the start of the 2025/26 academic year. We intend to work with sixteen pilot institutions, representing schools, colleges and universities, spread across all four devolved nations. Participating pilot institutions will have two academic years to implement actions, submitting their toolkits in May 2027, with the first student-led audits in June 2027. The institutions we consulted with requested this longer implementation period, recognising the fact that there are many constraints and barriers that they will need to overcome to deliver wilding actions.

4. Scale-up phase

The criteria and guidance produced through the pilot will be freely accessible in the public domain. We plan only to charge institutions to be audited and accredited. This will likely ensure the programme is scaled-up and rolled-out as quickly as possible, delivering the greatest benefit to nature. We intend to onboard the first non-pilot cohort from summer 2026, rather than post-completion of the pilot) to ensure we reflect the urgency of the ecological crisis.

5. Guiding principles

Student-led; inclusive; constructive; collaborative; guided by experts; affordable for institutions; demonstrably impactful.

6. Expected outcomes from the programme

- More student and staff have awareness of the ecological crisis and what can be done to abate it.
- Changes in attitudes towards nature-friendly practices by key decision-makers.

- Less synthetic pesticides and herbicides used on educational grounds.
- Reduced carbon footprint from mowing / more carbon sequestration through more sustainable grounds management.
- Less planting of non-native plants / more planting of native plants on educational grounds.
- Creation / restoration / connection of key habitats, leading to more biodiversity.
- Demonstrable uplift in biodiversity at participating institutions.
- National-level contribution to the recovery of red list / threatened species through the educational estate.
- National level data on biodiversity and habitats, which can be plugged into academic research by participating institutions.
- More young people valuing and connecting with nature and/or reporting benefits of being connected to nature.
- More youth-led nature campaigns and actions in their places of study and at home.
- Creation of communities of practice restoring nature across the different parts of the education sector (primary, secondary and tertiary).

7. Partners

Nature Friendly Grounds is being developed in collaboration with the **British Ecological Society, Environmental Association of Universities and Colleges, Learning Through Landscapes; Nature Positive Universities (University of Oxford), Swansea University, UK Youth for Nature, The Mammal Society, RSPB, Natural England and NatureScot.**