

Bringing Nature to Benson Primary School

1. Introduction

1.1 This project is part of a wider programme of activities aimed at delivering the objectives set out in Benson's Strategy for People and Nature. <https://www.bensonnaturegroup.com/benson-people-nature-strategy> The project has multiple aims: we want to create opportunities for local children to engage with the natural world, building understanding and inspiring support by them and their families for the village's green spaces. We also want to play a part in inspiring the next generation of citizen scientists and recorders.

1.2 Benson has a number of great green assets within easy walking distance of the local primary school, including a chalk stream and a small wildflower meadow. Investment in new green spaces as a result of anticipated development will increase the range of opportunities over the coming years.

1.3 The Government's recently published 25 Year Environment Plan sets out a strong ambition to reconnect people with the natural environment; there is a particular focus on young people, including a drive to create nature-friendly primary school grounds. Whilst the Dept for Education's funding on the latter project will target schools in disadvantaged areas, there is an opportunity to capitalise on the interest that will be generated by these initiatives.

1.4 The 25 Year Environment Plan also proposes a year of action for the Environment in 2019, envisaging a range of voluntary activities, coming together under a twitter campaign #iwill. There may be opportunities to piggy-back on the energy flowing from that if we begin planning for it now.

2. Approach

2.1 Benson Nature Group representatives have held a number of conversations (August/September 2017) with representatives of Benson Church of England School (Chair of Governors, Head of Science) about the scope for running a series of activities with a natural environment theme. Ideally this would constitute a rhythm of activities, supported through a sustainable partnership between the school and BNG, rather than a one-off event. The school has expressed an interest in pursuing this; the principle aligns well with one of the pillars in the school's 2017 Strategy, and the school is already considering a Forest School proposition using Bertie West's Field, a Parish Council controlled piece of land close to the school.

3. Constraints

3.1 The school's ability to engage is constrained by the following:

- No science budget, with science teaching reliant on free resource packs; alternative funding for any activities would need to be found (although the Friends of Benson School have been generous to date in funding additional activities and equipment). There is scope for subject leads to bid into the wider curriculum budget for proposals that fit with the School Development Plan;
- A very busy curriculum, with very limited capacity to make space for wider activities, particularly for Key Stage 2 classes;
- Insufficient resources to support trips/visits that involve any significant travel. Even if cost-effective transport is in place, there is often insufficient time available in timetable to allow for travel.
- Some approaches would require a certain ratio of adults to children (recommended ratios are 1:8 for children up to age 8; 1:10 for aged 8+) , and would also require DBS (Disclosure and Barring Service) checks for those leading/helping.

3.2 Benson Nature Group is also constrained - it is a very small group at present and its members are all volunteers with limited time to invest. Whilst some activities or projects could be low-cost, securing funding for anything more significant will take effort and time. Although the group has the aspiration to recruit more members as the village grows, this will take time to achieve.

3.3 To develop our thinking further, BNG has tested the idea of building a proposition around nature learning with Susie Coleman, a parent at the school who is a frequent user of environmental education centres locally such as Sutton Courtenay and the Earth Trust. Her advice is as follows:



- This would be a positive addition to the offering at Benson School.
- There are no arts/science-based after school clubs, so there would likely be an appetite for that option, but we should conduct some simple market research/canvass opinion via local fb pages.
- If we need to charge, make sure it is affordable - no more than £2/head.
- As an alternative to an after-school club, consider running events at weekends, with a requirement that parents supervise, which will simplify matters for BNG.
- Make any activities hands-on, the messier the better, with lots of touching, feeling and smelling. Make and do type activities work well, and the scouts and guide movements do well by creating a sense of adventure and exploration.

4. Options:

4.1 Following initial discussions with the school, a range of options have been considered. Table 1 below sets out a simple assessment of the pros and cons for each, taking account of the constraints outlined above. The RAG column indicates which activities are a priority to progress, based on a simple qualitative assessment of feasibility and benefits, with green (note two shades) most favoured and red less likely to warrant investment now by BNG. In all options, risk assessment will be required.

4.2 The analysis suggests that our initial focus should be on (i) on-site activities and (ii) promotion of BNG youth-focused activities through school. Field trips to local sites to support science learning in school will take a little longer to scope and design, but will help meet the objectives of increasing families' awareness of the village's green spaces, so will be worth some investment.

Table 1 - Options analysis

Option	Pros	Cons	RAG
On-site activities during school hours that support curriculum	<p>No travel cost or time. No need for additional supervision.</p> <p>Increase natural beauty of school grounds and provide green infrastructure resources (wildflower strips, pond, bee hotel) for use in a long term approach.</p> <p>Builds on interest generated by 25 year plan action to create nature-friendly school grounds.</p>	<p>To make the most of this will require investment in the establishment of suitable resources, but this could be a useful activity in itself.</p> <p>Does not directly meet objective of building awareness of local green spaces, but this could follow.</p> <p>During the establishment phase, may rely on volunteers with time to spare in the working day until teaching staff comfortable using resources alone.</p>	
Field trips (off-site) during school hours -within walking distance	<p>Attractive due to no transport cost and limited 'travel time'.</p> <p>Builds children's and teacher awareness of their local green spaces of which there is a good variety - wildflower meadow; wetland/fen; chalk stream; allotments.</p> <p>Scope to capitalise on emerging Forest School proposal based at Bertie West's Field (tbc)</p>	<p>Depending on specific destination, may require additional (parental) supervision, given that visits to some green spaces requires crossing of roads.</p>	

Option	Pros	Cons	RAG
Field trips (to other sites beyond the village) during school hours -requiring travel	Makes use of a wider range of opportunities such as Ewelme Watercress Beds; Sutton Courtenay Environmental Education Centre; Earth Trust; River of Life project	This option is already exploited as much as it might be by the school. Cost and time for travel will constrain any further use of it. It also does not directly help with awareness of local green spaces - in fact, it insinuates that there is nothing of value to see in the village.	
After school Nature club - a regular (weekly) event, hosted at village green spaces	Avoids putting pressure on school timetable. Creates flexibility in choice of topic.	Significant time commitment for BNG, requiring lots of volunteers or someone with a lot of time available. Requirement for DBS checks for BNG volunteers /club coordinators (unless attended by parents). Meeting adult to child ratios will require numbers to be capped, limiting benefits.	
After school club - an occasional or periodic (monthly?) event	Avoids putting pressure on school timetable. Creates flexibility in choice of topic. A lesser time commitment than a weekly club (but the reduced frequency may make this less popular for parents)	Requires a regular (although less frequent than a weekly event) time commitment by BNG. Requirement for DBS checks for BNG volunteers /club coordinators. Meeting adult to child ratios will require numbers to be capped, limiting benefits.	
BNG weekend/holiday activities promoted through school but run independently	No DBS checking required [confirm?], providing parents are required to stay and supervise. A number of activities are already in place, and promotion by the school could improve attendance. Builds family awareness of BNG and Benson's green spaces.	Relies on parental interest.	

5. Aligning proposals with Benson People & Nature Strategy themes:

5.1 There are three primary themes in the Strategy: Action for Pollinators; Spotlight on Benson Brook; and Access & Recreation. A science topic list has been provided the school (See Annex A) to help BNG consider what activities could be offered that would both enrich teaching of the science curriculum and align with People & Nature Strategy objectives.

5.2 The People & Nature Strategy aims to take a parish-wide approach. There may be opportunities to work with RAF Benson Primary School and others in the area to achieve similar outcomes, creating a partnership approach that helps schools share and learn from each others' experiences.

6. Proposals for Benson Primary School

6.1 We propose a phased approach, starting with developing some biodiversity/wildlife-friendly enhancements within the school grounds (see 6.3 below for detail). These will take some time to develop and deliver, but there are so many pros in terms of usability for the school (including repeat use) and alignment with government action that they warrant prioritisation. Some funding is likely to be required. BNG could take responsibility for scoping this - see Section 7 below.

6.2 Concurrently, BNG will look to add some additional occasional family/child-focused activities to its programme, running them at weekends or summer evenings and ask for the schools help to promote these (see 6.4 below). And finally, over time, we would work with the school to test the feasibility of village-based field trips (see 6.5 below). Further information of the sort of activities/projects envisaged across all three proposals is below.

6.3 Nature-friendly school grounds: Several of these projects offer multiple benefits, because there are opportunities for the children to be involved in design, planting, management and monitoring, offering art, science and practical activities all in one. Parental help could be sought at weekends or early summer evenings with some of the heavier construction work. The proximity of Bertie West's field (within a minute or two's walk from the school along a very safe footpath) means that we ought to consider it as a location for some of the proposed activities.

- Creation of wildflower margins on school field [will require careful siting given the likelihood that the school will need to expand onto part of the school field].
- Establishment of a bee hotel
- Pollinator planting in the courtyard

- Nest box building and positioning
- Creation of a raised pond

Further Ideas can be found here - <http://littlegreenspace.org.uk/features/Mobile-Kids-wild-gardens.html>

6.4 In taking this proposal forward, there is also an opportunity to engage with BBOWT's '5 Day Scrapbook Challenge', a competition which challenges primary schools across Oxfordshire to complete five 'acts of wildness' within their school grounds, which includes everything from creating a mini-meadow to building a bug hotel. Schools submit a scrapbook of their activities. This year schools have the chance to win a visit from Wheatley Birds of Prey. Runners up win a 'wild kit'.

6.5 Promotion of BNG-hosted after-school or weekend activities through school channels: There is one main children/family focused event in the current annual BNG programme: the moth breakfast, hosted at Millbrook Mead on a Saturday morning. There is also the Dr Anne Millar Day, a children's activity day hosted at the Watercress Beds in Ewelme, run by the Cress Beds Education team and BNG members but not previously branded as a BNG event. At present, both take place during the school summer holidays. BNG is currently considering increasing the proportion of events focused on providing activities of interest to families and children. We would like to publicise these activities via the school's comms with parents, including in regular newsletters and on Facebook via FOBS & 'Benson Family walkers' pages.

6.6 Off-site activities/field trips in the village: *list of possible venues will grow over time as new green spaces are established. eg Warwick Spinney which will become more accessible through the development of the second phase of the Littleworth Road development.*

- Field trip to Millbrook Mead, something focused on wildflowers and insects
- Kick sampling on Benson Brook (around Cuckoo Pen Nursery area)
- Bertie West's field - *note, Forest School initiative at this site under consideration.*
- Cress beds pond - requires travel
- Farm Visit - dependent on location, may require travel
- Building a swing over the brook

7. Funding

7.1 Funding will be required to support the establishment of biodiversity enhancements on the school grounds.

7.2 One of the most likely sources of funding is TOE2, <http://www.trustforoxfordshire.org.uk/how-to-apply.html> the Trust for Oxfordshire's Environment. It funds projects under three themes: Biodiversity, Access and Low Carbon agenda. Note however that the guidelines for applicants stress that projects that are simply about education or awareness-raising in itself are unlikely to be funded. There needs to a specific biodiversity enhancement benefit or access improvement associated with the work. BNG believes that the investment we have made in producing the People & Nature Strategy will enable us to justify a grant application on the grounds that this is part of a wider programme of 'well thought through' activities including physical enhancements aimed at delivering multiple benefits.

7.3 TOE2 welcomes projects which have secured match-funding. There may be an opportunity to approach Thomas Homes, the developer of the site known as Ben2 for support for the project. It has a track-record of supporting community endeavours in areas it is building in.

8. Next Steps

1. We will share this with contacts at Benson School, and subject to their approval, will work to draw up more detailed proposals in discussion. Ideas such as a bee hotel have great potential for very cost effective engagement, as the children and their families can be involved in planning, contributing materials and construction of the structure. Images of an attractive example are included below. The exact timing of the activity is not critical and can be arranged to suit the school.

Edel McGurk

Mar 18



Photo of a bug hotel at Hurst Water Meadow

Annex A - Science Topics at Benson C.E. Primary

Topics of particular relevance to Benson Nature Group interest are coloured blue in the table below.

Terms	1	2	3	4	5	6
Year 1	<p>All About Us</p> <p>The Human Body: how we grow</p>	<p>Night Night Sleep Tight</p> <p>Light and Dark: Nocturnal animals</p>	<p>Katie Morag and the Isle of Struay</p> <p>Materials + Properties: what's on the beach? Floating and Sinking</p>	<p>The Great Fire of London</p> <p>Materials and Properties Magnets</p>	<p>Amazing Animals</p> <p>Animals: labelling, grouping and classifying</p>	<p>Let it Grow!</p> <p>Plants and Seasonal Changes</p>
Year 2	<p>Extinct or not Extinct?</p> <p>Habitats: what keeps us alive? (Humans)</p> <p>Food Chains</p>	<p>Whizz, Pop, Bang</p> <p>Sound</p>	<p>Where in the world is Florence Nightingale?</p> <p>Pushes and Pulls</p>	<p>Green Giant</p> <p>Plants and Growing: germination, growth and survival</p>	<p>Bugs and Beasts</p> <p>Microorganisms and their habitats; butterfly house</p>	<p>Marvellous Materials</p> <p>Materials: changing and comparing materials</p>
Year 3	<p>Who do you think you are?</p> <p>Magnets</p>	<p>The Rotten Romans</p> <p>Forces: pushes and pulls</p>	<p>Who Likes Change? Benson Then and Now</p> <p>Mrs GREN</p> <p>Living Organisms</p>	<p>The Stone Age</p> <p>Rocks: soils, Earth's structure and Volcanoes Rocky the Rock</p>	<p>How do I grow?</p> <p>Plants: parts, function, germination, seed dispersal. Nutrition: Healthy States, food digestion/ PSHE</p>	<p>My Shadow and I</p> <p>Light and Shadows: reflection and refraction, how we see things/how eyes work</p>
Year 4	<p>Who's Your Mummy? (Egyptians)</p> <p>Different organisms.</p>	<p>Skelebones</p> <p>Human body: bones, muscles and exercise, link to PSHE. Drugs and medicines</p>	<p>Monarchs</p> <p>The Sun</p>	<p>Coasts UK</p> <p>Sound: sound waves (how we hear) Electricity Everyday Materials (classifying, sorting, sift, separate, magnetic, non-magnetic)</p>	<p>Extreme Earth</p> <p>Insulators and Conductors</p>	<p>Zany Zoology</p> <p>Living things: food chains, habitats, classification, lifecycles of frogs and butterflies.</p>

Year 5/6 (Year A) 2014-15 2016-17	Into the Future Classification: living things, micro-organisms, plants and animals.	World War II / We'll Meet Again Light: WWII Searchlights. Blackout: light / dark/shadow/ reflection.	Space Explorers Earth, Space and Magnetism	Alpha and Omega Evolution and inheritance, living things, reproduction, adaptation may lead to evolution.	Mighty Mountains Forces: air resistance, water resistance, density, friction. Levers, pulleys and gears.	The Adventure Revision of Light + Electricity. Insulators and conductors. Water cycle.
Year 5/6 (Year B) 2015-16 2017-18	Demanding Dilemmas Humans: circulatory system, incl. digestion, functions of heart, blood and blood vessels.	Trojan Horse Forces, levers, gears, pulleys and resistance.	Ancient China Revision: revisit any aspects of Science as necessary.	The Restaurant Everyday materials, reversible and irreversible changes, incl. dissolving and compounds.	Twisted Tales Water Cycle and Evaporation.	Raging Rivers All living things: life cycle of animals, humans and plants.