

Concept note: Rewilding Campuses

A nature recovery programme for green spaces
on UK university and college campuses

1. Background

The UK is one of the most [nature depleted](#) countries in the world and we are living through an ecological crisis. Rewilding is the large-scale restoration of natural ecosystems, creating species-rich habitats and increased carbon storage, helping to mitigate the climate emergency and ecological crisis. Rewilding 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.

Through our [Farming for Carbon and Nature](#) (FCN) work we know many colleges and universities have large agricultural landholdings. FCN aims to help provide the finances and support needed to transition to more nature friendly farming practices. Rewilding Campuses is being developed to complement this work, supporting nature recovery of non-farmed land owned or managed by the tertiary education sector.

In summer 2020 Defra launched their £40m [Green Recovery Challenge fund](#). The grant provided 100% of costs for projects that create new employment linked to the restoration of nature in England. A second round will be launched in Spring 2021 and we intend to apply for between £1.5m-£2.5m to fund Rewilding Campuses.

2. Proposed scheme

If successful, our funding application would provide the resources to run Rewilding Campuses at between six and eight universities and colleges in England for an initial period of two years. We would, ideally, like a mix of rural and urban campuses in the programme, with at least two further education colleges. We are looking for institutions to work in partnership with their students' unions through this programme. Students' unions will have an important role in owning and shaping the work, engaging conservation and environmental clubs and societies, and supporting volunteers.

Each institutional partnership (the institution and the students' union) would have sufficient grant income to employ one local project manager (based in either the institution or the students' union) to coordinate efforts, supported centrally by a National Programme Manager at SOS-UK. The funding would additionally provide for capital items like trees and hedgerows for planting, equipment and materials needed for the creation of wildlife ponds and wildflower meadows, bat, bird and bee boxes, boardwalks and interpretation, and volunteer management costs. We will encourage a move towards 'edible campuses' with the inclusion of fruit and nut trees for students and staff to forage.

We would like to see students taking a central role and benefitting from the rewilding, so biodiversity monitoring will be undertaken by trained student volunteers at each site and we would look to facilitate links with specific courses around land management, conservation and forestry. Being at university can be a challenge at any time but the pandemic has resulted in nearly three quarters (73%) of students saying their mental health has declined. We will therefore also explore the impact on student's mental health and wellbeing as a result of taking part in a future-focused restorative project, and their increased interaction with nature.

The grant would cover 100% of programme costs for up to two years, so we would need to move at pace to implement the changes we want to see to how campuses are managed for biodiversity gain. This should not be a barrier to being funded - the first round funded similar schemes, like the [urban fruit tree scheme in Manchester](#).

We know from previous interactions with the government that there is a perception that universities are relatively wealthy, so we would expect some in-kind to be contributed by university partners in our application (such as the time of academics advising on the nature recovery plan, estates team time helping with landscaping works, etc.) to help counter this. Match funding would not be required for any further education college partners in the bid.

3. Organisations we plan to approach to explore working with on Rewilding Campuses

- Rewilding Britain
- Soil Association
- Students involved in SOS-UK 'Students for Trees' project (funded by the Woodland Trust)
- The Woodland Trust
- The Kindling Trust
- Knepp Castle Estate

4. Webinar with potential programme participants

Ninety people signed up to help shape our ideas in a webinar on 9th February 2021. We are very grateful for everyone's contribution which will be used to inform our funding application. In summary, these were the top 10 most popular topics discussed in the breakout rooms in response to the question "What would the perfect rewilding programme would look like for you?":

- 1) **Staff resourcing** - providing on the ground help as well as national support would be very useful
- 2) **Connectivity to the wider movement** - opportunities for the sector to collaborate and share resources. Potentially scope for a national campaign element
- 3) **Education / curriculum links** - linking student dissertations and projects, embedding learning into formal curriculum.
- 4) **Student opportunities** - the opportunities provided need to give real employability skills to students. There needs to be plans in place to ensure continued student input for years to come.
- 5) **Project logistics** - diversity in projects is key, there needs to be room for creativity in on campus delivery, there should be some overarching principles to help frame the project.
- 6) **Biodiversity monitoring & other expert help** - baseline data is essential, there isn't a 'one size' fits all approach and local expertise would be really useful.
- 7) **Communications** - key to ensure campus community accepts, and hopefully champions, changes.
- 8) **Legacy** - longevity needs to be built in so that the work cannot be undone.
- 9) **Community links** - linking up with other local organisations e.g. councils, schools. Tie into wider area plans e.g. creation of wildlife corridors and local biodiversity action plans.
- 10) **Impact measurement** - what does good look like?

5. Next steps and funding

The dates of the second round of the Defra funding have not yet been announced, but we understand it will be launched before Easter 2021 and will likely have a three-week deadline for applications.

We invite any institution and students' union partnerships that are interested in being involved to submit an [Expression of Interest form](#) by 5th March 2021.

6. Contact

For more information, please email Tilly at tilly.jarvis@sos-uk.org or Odette at odette.wills@sos-uk.org.