



# MOULSECOOMB FOREST GARDEN AND WILDLIFE PROJECT

## ANNUAL REPORT 2023-24



The Moulsecoomb Forest Garden and Wildlife project was established in 1994. Set on the outskirts of Brighton in a large community garden, our project has two distinct strands. Regular workdays on our allotment site cater for 55-60 people, and we work with up to 70 pupils a week offering qualifications to young people who may not otherwise have the opportunity.

## ACTIVITIES, ACHIEVEMENTS AND PERFORMANCE



We are open 49 weeks of the year, with a two-week break at Christmas and week off at Easter. We provide educational services to schools and organisations during term-time (39 weeks a year).

This year we've made significant steps forward, offering more opportunities and qualifications as well as becoming more financially sustainable, a significant achievement in the current climate.

It costs on average £8,800 a month to keep the Forest Garden going. The charity is run on a tight budget, with staffing and service provision making up the majority of our costs; then we have overheads including insurance, cost of equipment and materials, and maintenance.



We provide:

- Two weekly work days at the garden which over 55 people attend, the majority with learning disabilities. Everyone gets a tasty, nutritious home-cooked lunch to say thank you for volunteering
- Outdoor one-to-one education at the garden for pupils struggling at school
- Working with 32 pupils a week at Brighton Aldridge Community Academy (BACA)
- Outdoor gardening sessions for 30 pupils a week at Moulsecomb Primary
- Plus school trips, and an endless stream of visitors from other community gardens, students, researchers and more looking at the benefits of outdoor learning.

We also run an easter and summer scheme for local families, thanks to funding from The Pebble Trust.

For us though, it's not just about the numbers – it's the stories behind them that are so important.

Our weekly workdays catering for 55-60 people a week are very well-established, as well as our educational support and teaching work with up to 70 children a week at Brighton Aldridge Community Academy (BACA) and Moulsecomb Primary.

We are now a centre for AQA Unit Award Scheme (UAS). The UAS complements our outdoor sessions by adding formally recognised records of achievement. Pupils are rewarded with a certificate each time they successfully complete a unit of learning. They can build up a portfolio of certificates to evidence their skills, knowledge and progress.

This scheme can help boost confidence, increase engagement, alongside improving motivation and interest, helping the young people to make progress on their lifelong learning journey. This includes transferable skills to school, home and beyond.

The first two students to receive their certificates both said it was the first time they had ever received any qualifications from school – and one is just about to leave. They were rightfully proud of their achievements with the head of the school telling us that if it wasn't for our work supporting him, one pupil would have been excluded from mainstream education.

We work with the Youth Justice Service (YJS) and their Restorative Justice programme, designed to provide opportunities for young people to make amends for their behaviour by working in their local communities. Simon, one of the YJS workers, said: *"The Moulsecomb Forest Garden offers our young people something completely different from what they are used to. They feel they can be themselves and leave behind their offending personas. The project has a massive positive influence in the rehabilitation and restorative development of all the young people who attend."*

Occasionally you might find random bits of art hanging from branches. This is thanks to the Family Trees Project which brings children in care together with their foster carers and biological parents. One of the organisers told me *"The garden has been instrumental in the success of the project. It has provided a calm and inspiring place for the children and their families to undertake activities and talk together. The families have loved seeing the garden change across the seasons, climbed trees and discovered different vegetables growing. The trees and flowers have provided materials for the many art activities that the families have enjoyed together. The project has had a direct impact on relationships between foster carers and parents, with them building more trusting relationships together. We could not have done it without the support of the garden."*

We ran a couple of sessions for the Sussex Interpretation Service with nature trails and a hot meal, for one of their team building days.

In the summer we ran after-school Duke of Edinburgh sessions for BACA pupils who needed to do some volunteering in their community. This gives us the opportunity to work with different pupils and support them into conservation, wildlife training and work experience.

In the Easter and summer holidays, Moulsecomb Primary children had great fun doing everything from building camps in the woods, making natural art, pizzas, and generally running around the garden like headless chickens. With the chickens joining in.



Other highlights include a successful open day welcoming over 200 people to showcase our work, with our volunteers taking the lead in planning and showing people around on the day. Miranda, the comedian came along to a birthday celebration, and we hosted a wedding reception. We were lucky to be nominated to join the Santa Bus in its 20<sup>th</sup> year, thanks to Brighton & Hove Buses, and we dished up a fantastic Christmas lunch to more than 40 people.



On the wildlife side we continue to promote urban biodiversity by carefully neglecting the edges of the site, with ponds and plants to attract pollinators. We make use of heritage seed varieties to promote plant diversity. We ran the RSPB Big Garden Birdwatch at the Forest Garden attended by 12 local people and friends, spotting 18 species. We continue with our weekly reptile count between March and October, and have a healthy population of slow worms, as well as lizards. We even recorded three toads this year. We have worked with the EcoSoc at the University of Brighton to monitor reptiles on neighbouring Home Farm Field, as well as working with South Downs rangers on habitat management activities there.



We estimate that we have served almost **3000** lunches over the year. All our recipes are vegetarian, nutritious and adapted to use food produced in the garden as far as possible, supplemented by donations from Fare Share, and local shopping. Cooking and eating together is an important part of our work, involving learners and volunteers in cooking and serving, as well as developing valuable food hygiene and organisational skills in keeping stores and equipment clean and tidy. Food waste is kept to a minimum, and recipes are shared on our Instagram and Facebook pages to promote healthy eating on a budget.



We were devastated to lose one of our hardest working volunteers this year. Keith has left a gap but also a lovely legacy, inspiring the team with his work ethic, and creating a beautiful seating and perennial border area at the top of the garden. We planted a tree for him with his family, and we will always miss him. [LINK](#)



We know our small community garden can have a big impact on people's lives - especially those who have been ignored or found doors closed to them – helping to realise their full potential, to raise aspiration, increase confidence and make them feel part of something. But it's also important that we work with others – local community groups, organisations and people to ensure that our roots reach out across the area so we can all support more people – while creating a magical space for wildlife to live and thrive.



## GOVERNING DOCUMENT

The organisation is a charitable company limited by guarantee, incorporated on 5th December 2001, and registered as a charity on 13th July 2007. The charity is governed under its Constitution, adopted 13th July 2007, and its Memorandum and Articles of Association incorporated 5 December 2001, as amended 12 December 2006. Under its Constitution, the Trustees are elected at each Annual General Meeting by the Members of the organisation for a one-year term. New Trustees can also be co-opted at a General Meeting. Trustees also act in the capacity of Company Directors.

The charity is run by the Trustees who are either long term volunteers or people chosen for their expertise and knowledge. In addition to the AGM, the Trustees meet at least four times per year to receive operational reports, review and agree policies and procedures, and address issues around strategic planning, risk management and finances. They delegate the management of the charity to the Project Manager who is responsible for the day to day running of the charity, including the management of personnel, the allotment, and all charitable activities.

## VALUES

The Moulsecomb Forest Garden and Wildlife project was established in 1994. Set on the outskirts of Brighton in a large community garden, our project has two distinct strands. Regular workdays on our allotment site cater for 55-60 people, and we work with up to 70 pupils a week offering qualifications to young people who may not otherwise have the opportunity.

This process, which can be learner-led, underpins the student's sense of wellbeing and overall positive learning experience. It demands a holistic overview, close communication with schools, key workers, parents and carers, and regular handover and feedback of information, backed up by progress reports tracking individual aims and objectives. Responsibility, trust and eventually leadership play a big role in personal development. Our therapeutic process engages young people diagnosed with learning difficulties such as Autism, Asperger Syndrome, Dyslexia and ADHD, who have had challenges in life, or who might have behavioural or mental health issues.

Using a therapeutic approach, these experiences and skills are transferable and can be integrated into other areas of life. In our experience applying this process and creating a safe space helps students to become more settled, both in school and at home. Both these strands come together during our open days where everyone showcases our work to the wider community. Where bonds are built, barriers come down and prejudices challenged, making the Forest Garden an important part of the social glue that binds communities together.

## EMPLOYEES AND TRUSTEES

The charity employs two paid members of staff: Pat Beach who works as our Outdoor Educational/Therapeutic Practitioner and Instructor; and Project Manager Warren Carter. They are supported by the services of a small group of professional freelancers with specialist fields of expertise. We have a regular cook every Tuesday and Friday (Jo Pearson) and a volunteer garden co-ordinator (Daisy Brown) on a Tuesday and on a Thursday at Moulsecomb Primary. In addition we are training Louis in the provision of educational activities under the guidance of Pat and the team.

The charity is governed by seven volunteer Trustees: Susie, Julie, Duncan, Mick, Rachel, Sara and Ross who between them have many years' experience of volunteering and working with the Moulsecomb Forest Garden, and are fully engaged with the ethos and continuing development of the charity.

They meet as Trustees with the Project Manager at least four times a year to oversee the management of the project and site, to ensure that policies and procedures remain current and that the wider responsibilities of ensuring regulatory and financial compliance are adhered to.

Trustees are in regular communication, and support the charity's activities in various functions including financial, admin, PR and HR. Several Trustees regularly attend as garden volunteers at the allotment site, so are both visible and easily accessible to staff and service users.

Staff meet regularly to plan and review current work, and we hold regular Forest Garden 'user group' forums where everyone is invited to discuss their views about how things work for them - in the spirit of continual improvement.

We regularly review our suite of policies that inform the running of the project, including our governance structure, which can all be found on our website.

## TRUSTEES

**Duncan Graham-Cameron:** "From a career background in IT and communications I now work as a professional archaeologist. I first became a volunteer in 2002 shortly after I moved to Brighton and soon after I joined the Management Committee before becoming a Trustee when I helped to convert the organisation into a Charity. As well as playing an active role in hands-on volunteering at the garden whenever my work allows, I manage the day-to-day financial transactions and provide other administrative support."

**Susie Howells:** "With a 30-year background in environmental management, sustainability and community engagement in private and public sectors, I am now a freelance environmental practitioner specialising in training, skills development and project management. I started volunteering at the Forest Garden in 2012 and have never looked back. Now chair of Trustees, I support the team's work with anything from general weeding, to building up networks and support for our work across the city, to updating our governance and policy framework to make sure we all work safely and effectively. I usually come to the garden every week. It's a real boost to work outside - and with some amazing people."

**Julie Shergold:** "I've been a Bookkeeper for over 25 years, working with Voluntary Groups both as an Employee and as a Trustee. As Treasurer for the Forest Garden I keep the accounts up to date on a monthly basis and prepare the financial details for this report and am proud to be part of such a brilliant project."

**Rachel Bicker:** "As a lifelong wildlife enthusiast, the conservation of nature and green spaces is a bit part of my ethos. I gained a BSc in Zoology and a Masters of Biological Sciences Research before going on to work in the wildlife conservation sector. As a biodiversity consultant for Gatwick Airport I work in a highly dynamic environment with high potential for human and wildlife conflict, fortunately I play a positive role in preventing and alleviating issues. I was introduced to the garden in in 2017 by chair of trustees Susie, and I became a trustee in late 2018. I was highly impressed by the way the garden was being run and the consideration given for wildlife. The diversity of species occurring on site is very high and marks it as an important green space within Brighton. My goal is to help record as many plant, animal and fungi species on site as possible in order to best inform the site activities, for maximising the benefits to wildlife."

**Ross Blackman** has worked for a national charity providing debt advice for the last 13 years. He has found most of his clients have some element of mental health problems and wanted to do more to help support excluded members of our community. He has a particular interest in the outdoors and how woodlands provide a sanctuary for us all. He also likes cups of tea. "I was looking for a new challenge and found the forest garden. I was impressed by how at the garden all are accepted for what they have to offer, and the focus is on working together to achieve the goal with everyone playing their part. I am proud to be involved in such a fun, positive, inclusive, organisation."



**Mick Ardron:** "I have been employed by Brighton and Hove City Council for over 22 years working in a small team supporting people with learning disabilities in their own homes. Over that time one of the biggest problems I have encountered is that large numbers of people with learning disabilities are isolated and seem to have no sense of belonging in the community. Many experience mental health issues as a result of this and lead unfulfilling lives not being able to reach their potential. Since November 2015 I have been volunteering at the Moulsecoomb Forest Garden and I have been incredibly impressed by such a resource for people with learning disabilities and other people with or without disabilities come together doing such meaningful activities in a welcoming, non-judgmental, fun environment. Here people are encouraged to develop their skills, meet other people in a relaxed, beautiful environment which is truly community based."

**Ruth Smart** stepped down as trustee, we are grateful for her involvement and excellent support to the project over the past few years. Sara Beck was nominated at our AGM in November 2023.

**Sara Beck** has been coming to the garden for the past 5 years in her role as a support worker from The Francis Taylor Foundation. The Francis Taylor Foundation's ethos of Extra Care Supported Living is to promote maximum independence and community involvement, challenging people with learning disabilities to develop new skills and confidence. Sara's understanding of people's needs, and her personal touch led the team to invite her to become a trustee. Sara is now working for Kings School in Hangleton as a teaching assistant within their Special Educational Needs Department.

The trustees who are also directors of the charity for the purposes of the Companies Act 2006, present their report with the financial statements of the charity for the year ended 31 March 2022. The trustees have adopted the provisions of Accounting and Reporting by Charities: Statement of Recommended Practice applicable to charities preparing their accounts in accordance with the Financial Reporting Standard applicable in the UK and Republic of Ireland (FRS 102) (effective 1 January 2015).



## OBJECTIVES AND ACTIVITIES

The Moulsecoomb Forest Garden and Wildlife Project is a small Brighton-based charity. Our project has two distinct strands: working with schools to provide an alternative route to pupils who struggle in a typical classroom setting; and running a genuinely inclusive community garden, involving people of all abilities and from all backgrounds: gardening, cooking and working together.

### AIMS

1. To promote sustainable development for the benefit of the public by the relief of poverty and improvement of conditions of life in socially or economically disadvantaged communities; and promoting sustainable means of achieving economic and social growth and regeneration
2. To advance the education of the public in the subject of sustainable development and to provide education and training where needed in promotion of sustainable development projects.
3. To conduct research into sustainable development and to disseminate the useful results of such research for the public benefit. Sustainable development means "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs".

### OBJECTIVES

The principal objectives of the charity are to:

1. Reduce anti-social behaviour by involving excluded pupils in the running of the garden.
2. Improve community health by offering free, organic and locally grown vegetables to low-income families.
3. Enhance skills and employability by offering practical based training and volunteering opportunities.
4. Get children involved in planting, growing and eating healthy food, and respecting nature and the environment.
5. Create and enhance wildlife habitats, protecting biodiversity including heritage vegetable varieties.
6. Promote sustainable lifestyles, by encouraging and educating people about composting and the benefits of organic gardening and locally produced food.