

Friends of Barnet Environment Centre : Chair's Report, September 2015

This has been a year of significant changes in many areas. The funding from John Lyon's Charity finished in October 2014, and our Centre Manager Annabel Foskett moved on to work for London Wildlife Trust. The uncertainties about funding and the timing of the construction of the new Environment Centre led us to decide to work without a Centre Manager during the winter, but once a definite date was set for the building to start, we applied for a longer term grant from John Lyon's Charity and were delighted to be awarded £30,000 over three years, starting in August 2015. Using the generous support we receive annually from the Hadley Trust, we were able to appoint Caroline Gellor as Environmental Education Manager in March. Caroline came to us after many years working as an Education Officer at the RSPB reserve in Rye Meads and came with a wealth of experience in environmental education. She very quickly made contact with schools and other youth organisations and we were delighted that during the summer term over 950 children visited the reserve. This number included three youth groups, A level students from Queen Elizabeth's School, and Work Experience enthusiasts from Mill Hill County and Queen Elizabeth's Girls School, in addition to the many children from local primary schools. Feedback from teachers and children has been consistently very positive.

Maurice Williams Construction Ltd was chosen by Noah's Ark to be responsible for the new build, and work started in January 2015. A new entrance to the site was created so that volunteers and visitors could enter our old building safely, with the other half of the building being used as the Site Office. This arrangement worked well, with construction going on apace and school groups able to use nearly all the site effectively. It was great shock to hear, at the end of July, with so much of the building work completed, that the contractors had gone into administration. Clearly this has led to a great deal of extra work for the Noah's Ark team, and the planned Opening Event in mid-September has been postponed. In the meantime, the site is being guarded day and night by a security company, but with access for volunteers to continue regular maintenance of the nature reserve.

Discussions continued between Noah's Ark, London Wildlife Trust and the Friends about the future running of the Environment Centre and maintenance of the reserve. At a meeting on site in July, it was decided that LWT would not take a significant part in that work, and so negotiations are currently taking place between Noah's Ark and ourselves to formalise an agreement.

In spite of the uncertainty over our future role at the reserve, the Volunteer group has expanded considerably, with a wider range of knowledge and skills. Caroline's enthusiasm and experience have helped us see more clearly how the reserve could be better adapted and maintained to provide more effective learning environments for the greater range of young people we intend to bring onto the site, and several new areas have been created, including a wonderful Wriggly Tree Trail. The boundary hedges have been strengthened, new paths created and unwanted undergrowth cleared. A second mini-beast area is being made by a group from The Challenge. We are now monitoring the wildlife on the reserve systematically, including a monthly butterfly survey and a quarterly photographic record.

It goes without saying that we are very excited at the prospect of moving into the new Centre. It will give us a wonderful new indoor environment for our visitors, with greatly increased display facilities and storage spaces. With this impressive new base, funding secure for three years and our band of enthusiastic volunteers, guided by our new Environmental Education Manager, we look forward to 2016!

Dick Elms, Chair of the Trustees