

Friends of Barnet Environment Centre: Chair's Newsletter December 2018

Dear Friends and Supporters

We have had another very busy and very interesting time since my last newsletter.

Our volunteers have worked extremely hard, as usual, to keep the Nature Reserve looking excellent and ready for school and other group visits and for our series of successful Community Open Days. The work on the hedging at various places around the site, particularly along the east boundary, has given us not only a wonderful approach to the Environment Centre but has also tidied up the whole western boundary as well. Thanks to John and David Sawkins for doing much of that and for organising the professional hedger to teach the techniques to our volunteers.

We were able to use the rest of our LBB Area Grant to finish off the garden, once the ground had dried out sufficiently and the contractors could get back to work.

We have been busy on several other projects this year, partly in response to various challenges. Drainage ditches have been excavated across the site to alleviate the problems caused by the attenuation ponds and building works and these have worked very successfully. We had a generous donation of bark chippings from Gristwood and Toms to make the muddy paths through the Reserve usable and this has proved an effective temporary measure. Skater pond has been completely renewed and looks excellent; it will be ready to use in 2019. Other ponds need to be repaired over the coming couple of years and planning for this is already under way. The management plan for the meadow has been put into effect and even at this early stage is showing good results.

Volunteer numbers are encouraging – we regularly have 15 - 20 people on a Monday afternoon, including several new recruits. Numbers on the first Sunday of each month are rather lower, but there is a regular and dedicated band of helpers and the amount and standard of work are, of course, greatly valued. The Saturday morning trial to increase the times available for volunteering was less successful; however, we are hoping to run these sessions again between April and July. We intend to organise regular Make A Difference Days throughout the year and we have a number of projects in mind for these. There was a very good turnout at the MADD we held on Saturday, 13th October, when we converted the old donkey shed into a bird hide.

We are also planning to open the Nature Reserve for self-guided visits during our regular volunteering sessions. Dates will be published early next year, so keep an eye on the website.

We secured a grant of £2709 from the Barnet Giving Charity and the London Community Foundation, specifically to publicise our activities, run sessions to attract more volunteers and develop their skills in ways which would support our work. As part of this grant project we have run training sessions for volunteers to increase their knowledge of the wildlife on the Nature Reserve.

As a result of the increase in volunteer numbers we have been able to create a butterfly corner and a wild flower glade and have worked on the wheelchair accessible raised beds in our outdoor activity area.

We have held several Community Open Days again this year and while numbers have not been huge (usually 50 - 60), all attendees have enjoyed the activities and Reserve tours and have got a lot out of their experience. We also held an Open House weekend to coincide with the Battle of Barnet Festival held on the rugby field; we had a lot of interest here, and around 250 people took themselves on self-guided tours of the Reserve - we hope to repeat this next year. Our half term event in October was a great success, with over 100 people attending.

Our Educational work with schools and youth groups has worked well again this year. Unfortunately, our Environmental Education Manager Caroline Gellor needed a major operation in June which meant that some of the school sessions had to be cancelled. However, we are very lucky to have volunteers who were able to step in and cover some sessions and a colleague of Caroline's, Sam McCabe, covered several school and other visits. In the end, only 250 children missed out on their Environmental experience (most of whom were rescheduled for this term) and we still welcomed 1663 children/young people as well as their accompanying adults (472). Huge thanks go to the volunteers

who stepped in and, of course to Sam. Caroline's recovery is progressing but she is not yet fully fit, much to her frustration, and is mainly working from home to get lesson plans and work schemes sorted out and, of course, publicising the Environment Centre and taking bookings for next summer term. We wish her a full and speedy recovery.

If we look more closely at the visitor figures, we have about 2,500 individual visits per year, or to put it another way, that is 50 visitors per week for 50 weeks of the year, which is pretty good.

Work on the Noah's Ark Hospice is moving forward and staff expect to begin moving in around Easter next year. Meanwhile, our partnership work with NACH is developing. We have regular meetings now with the Director of Care and the Director of Finance to discuss major issues affecting both charities. We are also developing schemes for working closely together to organise environmental activity days for siblings of the children NACH cares for, and planning for future work with the cared-for children. We already have raised flower beds/work benches constructed on the hard standing work area at a height convenient for wheelchair users and we have begun discussions to make some paths more wheelchair friendly.

An increasing number of corporate groups have also visited the site, on training/team building days, from local and national companies (including Google, Network Rail, Hilton Hotels) and this is another aspect of our joint work with NACH. There have been 10 of these 'Corporate Days' this year, with an average of 9 participants on each occasion and our volunteers have worked closely with Noah's Ark staff to organise and run the days.

So we look forward to another challenging year. NACH will be moving in to the new Hospice building and this brings with it the potential for working more closely together on further developments in our joint ventures. FoBEC has several projects to work on in the coming months (the hide, ponds, hedging, the meadow, the butterfly corner, wild flower glade). We hope the weather doesn't throw too much at us this year, but hopefully we will be able to cope again!

Finally, I must, of course, give a huge vote of thanks to the volunteers and trustees of FoBEC for all the work they put in, not only on the Reserve but also helping with school visits and with community events. I would also like to thank them for all the support they have given me over the past year. If you would like to get more involved and help out with work on the Reserve, help get the classroom ready and/or tidy it up, or join in with Open afternoons and half term activities, then please get in touch – we would love to see you at the Environment Centre.

May I also take this opportunity to wish you all a very happy Christmas and I hope 2019 is a prosperous and fulfilling year for you. Thank you for your continued support and it would be great to see you at the Environment Centre in 2019. Do keep in touch with our activities via our website.

Bernard Johnson Chair of Trustees The Friends of Barnet Environment Centre

PS: Our ever popular Quiz will take place on Saturday, February 9th, 2019, 6.30-10pm, at the Pennefather Hall next to Christ Church on St Albans Road, Barnet, EN5 4LA. The cost will be £12 per person, to include a jacket potato supper. Bring your own nibbles, drinks and glasses. If you would like to come along, please contact Linda Perry on linda.perry25@gmail.com Tables of eight will be available, but if you are by yourself, please talk to Linda who will put you on a table with other very pleasant supporters of FoBEC.