



Chair's Update

February 2020

Dear Members and Volunteers,

I would like to update you on our project to improve engagement and accessibility at the Nature Reserve.

As you know, we have been working for some time now to put together a bid for a grant from the National Lottery Heritage Fund (NLHF). A Project Proposal was submitted to NLHF before Christmas and we had a positive, constructive and useful response by 2nd January. We are now consulting widely to make sure we meet the requirements of as wide a spectrum of potential users as possible.

The basic aim is to improve the experiences of visitors to the site and to increase the range of groups who are able to use the site. To do this, we need to improve some of the paths to allow easier access for people unable to use the site currently, for example those in wheelchairs, families with buggies, the elderly and a wide range of people with disabilities. It would of course also allow the children cared for by Noah's Ark Children's Hospice (NACH) to engage with nature on the Reserve and we are having discussions with senior staff there to establish the best way to do this.

Although the detail will be decided over the next few weeks, it is clear that we need an environmentally friendly surface for the paths; we have a cost estimate from a company called Ecosurface based on using Ecobond rubber mulch, which has been recommended by the Sensory Trust as appropriate for this type of site. This is made of recycled rubber and bonding materials which give a composite but porous surface. You will have seen a range of similar surfaces in Barnet, for example in children's playgrounds, in parks and around the bases of trees along the pavements; we will be very careful to use a suitably discreet colour for the Reserve. We would not resurface all paths on the Reserve – our thought at the moment is to have a perimeter path, following the existing paths, plus the path through the pond area and the circular Centre Garden path. It would also be useful to have a good surface in the teaching and service areas beside the Environment Centre, though not necessarily in ecobond. The only 'new' section of path, though in fairness it would be a replacement of a path that was removed during construction of the Ark, would be across the eastern edge of the Meadow to complete the full perimeter circuit.

Several other ideas are being considered: resurfaced paths could enable us to have a sensory trail and a tree trail, with simple seating areas (7 currently suggested). People would be able to 'pause and ponder', listen, watch, touch, smell their surroundings and be able to access information from small low key information boards with QR codes (machine readable optical labels that contain information about that point on the site). There could also be raised 'sensory beds', mini beast areas and a pond (Murky Pond) to allow access to activities for school children in wheelchairs. We are also discussing an upgrade of our leaflets and maps, to enable visitors to make the most of their time on the site and to leave having learnt something new and/or seen things in a slightly different way. This is all based on our underlying purpose, which is environmental education.

As you may imagine, this is a big task. We are currently discussing possibilities with a range of focus groups – schoolteachers and children (including Special Schools), wheelchair users, those with disabilities, NACH care staff, members of, and groups within, the local community and you, our members and volunteers. We are also working closely with NACH and with the Hadley Trust on this project.

If you would like to be part of a member/volunteer focus group or if you have any comments you would like to make about the FoBEC Engagement and Accessibility project, then please get in touch via info@fobec.org.uk We would very much appreciate your comments and ideas.

Thank you for your continuing help and support. Please feel assured that we are aiming only to improve the accessibility of the Reserve and to enhance the experience of our visitors and users; there is no intention to detract from its character as a peaceful Nature Reserve in any way.

Bernard Johnson, Chair of FoBEC