



Name of group

RNN Group

Location

Rotherham and Bassetlaw

Introduction

RNN Group is a Further Education provider, meeting the needs of thousands of employers, adults and school leavers every year and contributing at the heart of its local community. RNN Group comprises four campuses of career-focused further and higher education in South Yorkshire and North Nottinghamshire, including Rotherham College and University Center Rotherham in the heart of Rotherham, North Notts College in Worksop, and Dearne Valley College in Swinton.

What actions did you or your group want to take and why? (The inspiration and motivation)

RNN Group aspires to be a sustainable organisation, and wanted to provide habitats and a home for nature on our campuses whilst engaging all involved with RNN. We wanted to work with partner organisations to make this a reality. We have worked with Sheffield and Rotherham Wildlife Trust, Rotherham Council and other local partner organisations to undertake several activities to create new habitats, increase biodiversity and resilience, and promote learner engagement with nature.

In November 2021 Dearne Valley College joined Nature Recovery Rotherham, and the following March it achieved Bronze status as a Hedgehog-friendly campus. This meant changing the way grounds maintenance was carried out, and increasing the awareness

of staff about what hedgehogs required. These changes to accommodate such iconic animals have benefited other wildlife too, as habitats have been maintained and extended. An event to celebrate this was attended by 80 people from the local community.

Dearne Valley College is home to a 4.2Ha woodland, smaller thickets and an area of heath. In February 2024 staff and students worked with Sheffield and Rotherham Wildlife Trust to plant 200 trees in an area approximately 1200m² with species such as crab apple, alder, elder, euonymus, silver birch and beech, to produce a woodland corridor.



Along with dead hedges, also created by students, this woodland linked habitats together to create one larger habitat. This increases the number of species and numbers of individual creatures that can be supported by the habitats. Students are developing a woodland management plan that will create a more diverse and robust woodland.

Rotherham College and North Notts College have for the past two years taken part in the Big Schools Birdwatch, with students counting the numbers of birds visiting the campuses, exploring what they can see and hear in the grounds. Students engage with nature and, with the submission of bird numbers to the RSPB, they can feel part of a bigger campaign.



In June 2023 in partnership with the Sheffield Bird Study Group, a peregrine falcon box was constructed by the College's joinery department and installed at the main Rotherham College building. We don't have a resident yet, but "build it, and the will come"!

RNN Group took part in No Mow May 2023 at Rotherham College and North Notts College. Whilst this was fairly successful, a decision this year was made to leave some grassed areas to grow throughout the growing season, to allow the flowers to complete their life-cycles and self-set. The existing seed stock was supplemented with seeds provided by the keen gardeners amongst staff, to increase the number of species present. The intention is to make the habitats more resilient. A cut at the beginning of the growing season allowed the flowers to become established before grass cover became too dominant. A final cut at the end of the year will remove nutrients from the areas, as wildflowers prefer nutrient poor soils. Information boards have been created by students to explain the what and the why of the project.

Recently students from our joinery courses have made planters and bird boxes. The planters were then used by students from our FLEX courses during National Gardening Week, at the same time as the bird boxes were installed.

How did you empower or involve others?

Students are at the core of the Group's activities and wherever possible students have been involved in the projects. Access to nature, particularly in town centres, can be limited, so the projects provide a great opportunity for students to learn more about the natural world around them. "If you don't know about it, you can't care for it."



How did it make you feel?

The projects we have undertaken are generally simple actions that benefit nature. Student engagement with nature is important, and seeing them enjoy being outside and taking part makes the effort of developing and running these projects worthwhile.

What's next?

There are plans to extend the wildflower areas to all areas on Rotherham College campus and North Notts College campus, to make this the norm. There are also areas on all campuses that have the potential for planting of flowers, shrubs and trees, and the Group continues to work with Rotherham Council to select the right plants for the right areas.

Photo credits: Elesha Searles, Scarlett Smithies